

CAMINO'S CASE STUDY: BUILDING A SCHOOL CULTURE FOR RESEARCH USE

This practitioner story shares the journey of Teresa (Research Lead and Instructional Coach), Gina (Deputy Principal - Learning and Teaching), James (Learning Area Lead and Instructional Coach) and Charlotte (VCE Teacher) as they reflect on the progress their school has made in building a school culture that uses and values research. The story from Camino Catholic College highlights three key learnings that you could consider in relation to your own work:

1. *Sharing research and examples of how it can be used in practical ways helps to foster collective interest and positive mindsets about research use.*
2. *Building a culture of thoughtful and active sharing of research can be facilitated through having a dedicated Research Lead in a school.*
3. *Embedding research use in school structures, systems and infrastructure is key to supporting the development of a research-engaged school culture.*

WHAT WAS THE CONTEXT?

Camino Catholic College is a large co-educational secondary Catholic school located in suburban Melbourne. The school has approximately 1500 students and 200 staff. Since 2020, Teresa has held the position of Research Lead at Camino after she was involved in the Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS) Research Lead pilot program. The aim of that program was to lead and implement strategies, processes and initiatives to strengthen research access and engagement, as well as evidence use, to ultimately improve student outcomes.



Teresa has played a key role in developing the research use culture at Camino. When she was first appointed to the role of Research Lead in 2020, she conducted a survey of teachers about their use of research to inform their practice: “We confirmed what we thought in that [the staff are at a] very introductory level” and “not really referring to research outside of formal professional learning days”. In fact, Teresa categorised the teacher’s research use at that stage as being a “one out of ten”. Teresa attributed this to a lack of research use skills and lack of access to research, as well as a mindset amongst some teachers that research use was “just another one of those things, that research is an add-on and that after we tick ‘this box’, we get back to the real teaching. It’s definitely not part of our culture here to use research to inform decision making”.

Over the past two years, the school leadership team has worked hard to promote the use of research at Camino through focusing on sharing research and examples of how it can be used in practical ways; having a dedicated Research Lead role; and embedding research use in school structures, systems and infrastructure. These initiatives include a Professional Learning Hub, a professional reading book club and an instructional coaching program linked to research-informed strategies.

Two years on, Teresa would now rate the school’s research use at a five out of ten. James agreed with this rating “because I think we’re open to ideas and research. [But] do I think that it’s necessarily discussed widely enough across the college? ... No, I don’t”. Charlotte commented that as a classroom teacher, “I know there is stuff going on, but it doesn’t filter down to me very much ... [but] I think having Teresa’s role [of research lead] has really driven this [increase in the visibility of research use] ... and the school putting that in is just fantastic”. However, from her perspective, she would rate research use at the school as about a “three out of ten”.

So, while the school has built a great foundation for research use, they believe there is still more to do. In the future, Teresa would like to further develop the culture of research use at Camino through implementing an overarching framework for professional development.

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HOW IS CAMINO DEVELOPING A SCHOOL CULTURE FOR RESEARCH USE THROUGH SHARING RESEARCH AND EXAMPLES?

Sharing research and practical examples has been an important part of developing a culture of research use at Camino. Since being appointed to her role as Research Lead in 2020, Teresa has instigated a number of initiatives to support teachers to use research in their teaching and learning practice.

Firstly, she introduced a lunchtime professional reading book club for staff to discuss educational texts, such as Tim O'Leary's [Classroom Vibe](#) and Tom Sherrington's [Rosenshine's Principles in Action](#). Teresa commented, *"I love the fact that we have really interested people involved and it's connecting like-minded people"*. In this way, Teresa is giving opportunities to those teachers who are already keen to discuss how they can better use research in their practice, with the aim of developing a collective vision for research use across all the teachers over time.

Secondly, as a way of reaching more teachers across the school, Teresa developed a Professional Learning Hub on the school learning management system to collate and synthesise research for teachers so they can apply it to their practice. She described how *"the first initiative that I worked on was to improve access to research because using the search engines was proving to be a little bit cumbersome"*. On this portal, Teresa *"catalogues different research topics and ... really good articles that I found and have included supplementary resources, which I thought were really important considering where we're at as a staff. Videos, blogs, podcasts, to just almost create the starting point and then lead them into engaging with an academic article about that topic. That started off with about six topics and has grown to 30"*.

As well as providing access to research articles, Teresa also synthesises them for teachers to make them more user-friendly: *"One of the pages on the professional learning hub I've called 'Unpacking research'. I've collated different scaffolds, different templates and thinking routines that leaders can use to unpack their article ... it would be great to actually practise doing that because we presume people can do it, but everyone's at different levels"*. In this way, Teresa is carefully building resources and scaffolding activities that are differentiated to suit the different learning needs of the teachers.

On the Professional Learning Hub, Teresa also repackages research so that it is easily digestible for all teachers. For example, during remote learning she *"developed two-minute clips called 'research in action' clips, and I chose some topics that were relevant to teachers at the time"*. Teresa reflected that *"I got really positive feedback about it because they were quick to watch. When you're watching a video, it felt like it was less strain on the mind at the end of the day"*.

Thirdly, Teresa produces a monthly research bulletin in order *"to promote the idea of ongoing learning ... I choose a topic every month and try and summarise a little bit of the research, so it's just a one-page document. On the other side of it, I'll have highlighted resources which are available on the relevant Professional Learning Hub page so it's always pointing people to further reading"*. Teresa was inspired to produce this bulletin as a result of the MACS Research Lead pilot training program she completed. At this training, she learned that using research *"is not giving people academic journals and saying, 'Read this'. But it's about being really strategic. It's about considering what you're presenting to people, considering what the need is. And I know that that was a lightbulb moment for me"*.

Interestingly, Teresa reflected that the teachers who were most engaged in these research use activities *"have a varying range of experience, but they're all teachers with growth mindsets"*. Therefore, in Teresa's experience, interest in research use was not necessarily linked to teachers' levels of experience or recency of university education, but rather their positive and curious mindsets.

HOW CAN HAVING A DEDICATED RESEARCH LEAD ROLE HELP TO BUILD A CULTURE OF RESEARCH USE IN A SCHOOL?

Another important way of building a culture of research use at Camino has been having a dedicated and ongoing Research Lead position in the school to help raise the visibility of research use. Teresa reflected that she:

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“Really loves the work. I feel like this is the type of thing that I want to continue doing and direct my energy towards because I really see the value in it and the potential for this to have an impact”.

Having a dedicated Research Lead position also demonstrates the leadership team’s commitment to valuing research as a key part of decision-making and practice improvement. Teresa reflected that *“I have felt very empowered by [the Principal], very supported and he highly values research so I’m in a really good place”*. Teresa was mentored and supported by the Principal and other school leaders, who encouraged her to experiment and ‘have a go’. She described how she felt *“very fortunate to have leadership that’s supportive of us trying things, I never felt that I couldn’t do something [that] was a bit of a risk”*. This is an example of how strong, supportive and visible leadership can help to build a culture of research use in a school.

Another element of developing a research use culture at Camino has been networking with Research Leads in other schools and systems, to see how they are using research well in practice. When Teresa started as a Research Lead, it was *“new territory”* for her, but connecting with other research-invested schools helped her to feel less like being *“on your own rowing a little boat”*. This networking has also provided opportunities for sharing ideas and initiatives which she has brought back to Camino.

However, Teresa was also aware of the importance of context when looking at the research initiatives implemented by some large Independent schools which have Learning Institutes, which are *“not feasible”* for her school. As part of investigating what might work best at Camino, Teresa is *“trying to visit schools who already run [research-informed initiatives such as [Teaching Sprints](#)] to see what it looks like and how they successfully integrated into their culture and what it was that made it a success”*. In this way, Teresa is collecting evidence about how research is being used in other schools, which she can then use to inform the development of research use at Camino.

HOW CAN SCHOOL STRUCTURES, SYSTEMS AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESEARCH-ENGAGED SCHOOL CULTURE?

Camino has also developed infrastructure to support the development of a research-engaged culture. For example, in addition to the Professional Learning Hub described above, the school also has a voluntary instructional coaching program. In this program, teachers meet with their coach to focus on a particular area of skill development in their teaching practice or leadership using research-informed strategies. For James, the work of coaches *“is very much research driven”*.

Teresa, who is also an instructional coach, explained that the coaching program uses a *“growth coaching model to help them set goals, improve elements of their practice, or essentially through coaching conversations, work through particular issues”*. For example, Teresa explained how she discussed research about differentiation with one of her teachers, who then *“went away and created a few different activities based on levels ... it was just for a lesson, but she was able to talk me through how she felt about that. And the impact. So hopefully, it’s just planted some seeds”*. In this way, Teresa is using a multi-level approach to developing the research use culture at her school, by working with individual teachers as well as working more systematically across the school through the Professional Learning Hub.

The link between the Research Lead and the coaching program is one that Teresa would like to see develop further as part of the school structure and systems: *“Currently, my work is more about driving initiatives to just get the message out”*. In the future, if the school developed a *“framework which requires everybody to be involved”* in using research, then the *“the research lead can then offer resources, engage in discussions with leaders, and then also hopefully teams, around how we can support the implementation and measuring”* of research-informed approaches, as well as working with coaches *“to really integrate those approaches”*. At present, the coaching program is a voluntary one, so all teachers are not required to be involved.

The school leadership team is also in the process of developing an instructional playbook, which James describes as *“a teaching and learning framework, which is research-driven”*. The aim of this initiative is to streamline the research-informed strategies that teachers

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can use and provide classroom-based examples. According to James, research use *"is a mindset and a culture, you've got to create the right ... ingredients to get people to ultimately buy in, at the start, but then want to continue to engage people to see the benefit of it ... ultimately, we're doing this ... for an improvement reason ... Hopefully, that makes your job easier"*. Therefore, the playbook is an example of the infrastructure which Camino is putting in place to help develop a collective positive mindset.

As part of developing the research use culture of the school, all teachers from Camino were offered the opportunity to be involved in the trial of the Monash Q Project professional learning program 'Using Research Well in Practice'. Teresa participated in the course because she felt *"it was very important to walk the talk"* as a Research Lead, rather than just supporting other staff to do it. Gina, in her role as Deputy Principal - Learning and Teaching, also thought it was important that she be involved in the professional learning program, so she was *"doing as well as ... supporting. It's not okay for me to just say, 'Well, you go off and do it ... and tell me about it.'"* Teresa shared the project she completed as part of the course with her colleagues at a staff forum, so they could see an example of a research-informed strategy in action and hear about the impact it had. Teresa reflected that *"I think it really emphasised how important [it is to] just share experiences and try things ... because, as I really wanted to emphasise, it's not to say everybody does it my way, but [to] get them thinking about what might work"*.

WHAT BARRIERS STILL EXIST FOR DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF RESEARCH USE AT CAMINO?

Over the past two years, there has been an improvement in the school culture for research use at Camino as a result of the initiatives that have been put in place to improve teaching and learning practices. However, Teresa has identified some barriers that still exist to further developing the research use culture, including: change fatigue amongst teachers; a lack of time for teachers to engage in research; a sense that research use is 'one more thing' for teachers to do as part of their workload; and the lack of an integrated framework for research use across the school.

Teresa recognises there is a degree of *"change fatigue"* amongst the staff at Camino, as *"there's been a number of different initiatives rolled out"* over the years that have *"not taken hold and then not really made an impact, and so we've got some long-serving staff here who have seen these different, almost fads, come and go"*. Some teachers were also reluctant to engage in research-focused professional learning. For example, Charlotte described how some teachers questioned why she was undertaking professional learning about research use, especially when teachers have so many other claims on their time: *"I almost had to defend my being part of this project to some of the other teachers"*.

In his role as a Learning Leader, James has worked hard to encourage his staff to see professional learning as *"not something that's done to you. It's something you engage in, continually"*. For James, research use is a way of *"empowering [teachers] to be involved in the delivery"* of the teaching and learning program. However, he also recognises that undertaking professional learning about using research can be perceived by teachers as an addition to their workload, rather than being a core part of their work. He explained that his school needed to *"look [at] how we can apply what we've done here with the research ... because it is the future. And I think as educators, we need to be used to [using research and data] in that way"*. It is therefore important that teachers are able to see examples and understand how using research can be of assistance to them in their teaching practice.

The Camino team recognises that while they have made some great progress in their research use journey over the past few years, especially in terms of introducing infrastructure and initiatives, there is still some way to go.

In the future, the Camino team are considering ways in which research-focused professional learning can be built into the school day, which may help to address the lack of time available and the visibility of research use at the school. Gina commented that *"what I'm looking for is more time for staff to talk about their practice ... the staff are crying out for time to work together"*, however this is difficult when there are so many other competing priorities. For James, *"to do things after school ... sometimes it loses the buy-in because people are tired. So they see it as this add-on"*. He suggested that if time to meet and collaborate about research could be built into the school day, *"it becomes part of your role [rather than] being seen as this 'extra'."*

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Another barrier that Teresa identified to creating a stronger culture of research use is time: *“Time is a huge thing for us ... I love the phrase ‘carving out time’ because [research use] it is so important and we appreciate the impact it can have. We must make time, we cannot presume that people will just do this out of goodwill, of their own accord”.*

In her role as Research Lead, Teresa has worked hard to ensure that teachers feel *“I’m not just imposing things and I’m really listening to their needs [but] I think what I’m hearing very loudly is time is such a huge issue and unfortunately, we get so caught up in busy work, admin stuff, that people can’t find time to do development work”.* As a leader within the school, Teresa is considering what can be done to *“reduce this busy work because ultimately our goal is to improve student outcomes. We know that teachers are one of the biggest influences in that so how can we support them to continue to develop? And, time is the biggest issue, I would say bigger than mindset here, because we do have some very well-intentioned staff who do want to try.”*

Teresa is also keen for the school to develop an integrated framework for research use across the school such as [Breakspear’s Teaching Sprints](#): *“I think, if we want this at a wider scale, because we’ve got teachers coming from very different backgrounds, and different experiences, lots of change over from lots of schools ... people who haven’t ever really required research to inform their practice ... [a framework would] give us a platform to say, ‘This is important ... and this has the potential to have impact’. We are all together, supporting. So that it becomes second nature.”*

Teresa observed that the teachers *“all have this sense of, ‘I can learn, I’m looking for some information about this.’ I think that’s really critical when we’re considering any of these initiatives and so I’ve thought about how to promote and support that growth mindset”.* For these teachers, embedding research use in school structures, systems and infrastructure is key to further developing the research-engaged school culture at Camino.

KEY LEARNINGS

1. **Sharing research and examples of how it can be used in practical ways helps to foster collective interest and positive mindsets about research use:** At Camino, Teresa has developed a Professional Learning Hub which summarises and synthesises research for teachers on a range of topics, as well as facilitating a lunchtime book club for teachers about the latest research-informed initiatives in education to encourage discussion, debate and reflection. [How could you improve opportunities to share research at your school? How could you connect with research use networks in your area?](#)
2. **Building a culture of thoughtful and active sharing of research can be facilitated through having a dedicated Research Lead in a school:** Having a dedicated Research Lead role contributes to the development of a school culture for research use, by facilitating and empowering other teachers to use research in their practice. Such a position is also an example of the importance of strong, supportive and visible leadership as part of building a culture of research use in a school. [How could you strengthen the prioritisation of research use by leaders in your school? How could this be better communicated to your school community?](#)
3. **Embedding research use in school structures, systems and infrastructure is key to supporting the development of a research-engaged school culture:** Camino’s instructional coaching program uses research-informed strategies to improve teaching and learning practices. Camino is also looking to develop an overarching framework to embed research use as part of the school culture, as well as a playbook of research-informed strategies to support improved professional learning opportunities about research use. [How could you embed research use in the structures and processes of your school? What infrastructure investments might be required?](#)

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

This practitioner case study connects with the organisational enabler of **school culture** of our QURE Framework. At Teresa's school, research use is beginning to be embedded in culture through school processes and structures, such as having a Research Lead position, a Professional Learning Hub and an instructional coaching program. The school is working on developing a framework to embed research use across the school, and has joined a network of research-invested schools to support and share examples of research use in practice.

You can find out more about the organisational enabler of **school culture** 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](#).