

TONY, BREE AND RICHARD'S CASE STUDY: CONSIDERING APPROPRIATE RESEARCH

This practitioner case study shares the journey of three educators, Tony, Bree and Richard, and how they drew on their research-use knowledge and skills to select and apply research that was appropriate for their context. Tony, Bree and Richard's story highlights three key learnings that you could consider in relation to your own work:

1. ***Before implementing a research-informed initiative, carefully consider whether the research is relevant to the school context.***
2. ***Discussion and collaboration about research findings enable teachers to understand the purpose and value of a research-informed initiative and how it applies to their context.***
3. ***Through accessing appropriate research, these teachers were empowered to bring together an approach that suited their context.***


WHAT WAS THE CONTEXT?

Tony, Bree and Richard are maths teachers at a large school which provides virtual learning for students. Tony is the Acting Assistant Principal, and Richard and Bree are leading teachers. Bree is also a course writer in the mathematics department. They all teach in an enrichment program designed for high ability students in Grades 5 - 8 for students who have been selected to participate through their NAPLAN results and teacher judgement. The 10 week enrichment program involves students participating in virtual synchronous classes for one hour per week with approximately 20 other students from different schools. Students also complete some asynchronous activities in between their weekly virtual classes. Due to the online format and the enrichment context, Tony commented that *"a lot of what we do is a bit different from a kind of normal classroom [so] you need that kind of flexibility."*

Tony, Bree and Richard are highly research engaged. They are all avid readers of current research, and Tony is currently undertaking postgraduate studies in educational research. Bree, who is also the President of a professional association for gifted students, believes very strongly *"in curriculum development that's soundly founded in research."* In 2022, Tony, Bree and Richard completed the Monash Q project professional learning course Using Research Well in Practice.



The online school has a culture of engaging with and discussing research, and this collaborative approach underpinned the project they completed as part of the PL course. Tony reflected that *"I think we do have quite good robust discussions about our kind of core purpose and why we're doing it and what it's based on, and ... [about] our rationale"*. In addition, the remote nature of their working conditions means that they have developed numerous online discussion forums on topics that are research-informed. Bree noted that across the whole school *"I think our work culture is such that [research is] part of our ordinary discussion"*. Building on this culture, this team wanted to undertake a project that was based on appropriate research.

 *"Way more than in other schools that I've been in, [we discuss] research or really interesting issues, or meaty things, and I think it's the fact that we're dealing with kids who are interested in these things, too, that we're always on the lookout for something that's challenging intellectually. And we're always challenging one another. So that's part of our culture."*

TONY, BREE AND RICHARD'S CASE STUDY: CONSIDERING APPROPRIATE RESEARCH

WHAT WAS THE FOCUS?

As the time spent with their students in the online gifted maths course is limited to 10 weeks, Tony, Bree and Richard wanted to focus on understanding and improving student engagement during these virtual classes. Initially, they considered developing a tool to measure engagement as part of their project for *Using Research Well in Practice*. Bree commented that doing the professional learning course together gave them the “*time and space to talk with one another about what was most important to implement.*”

As they completed the modules, participated in coaching sessions and had discussions as a team about where they were at, they realised that before they developed a tool, they needed to firstly consider what engagement looked like in their context. Notably, this was a more narrow focus compared to what they originally thought they would be working on. Bree reflected that “*it was different to what we expected, because we didn't expect to be working with engagement, we sort of expected to be working with something more to do with curriculum development.*” They then decided that the question they would address through their project would be “*can we identify a range of markers that may indicate engagement in the online high ability program?*”

In this way, they were open-minded about where the research led them, rather than following a preconceived set pathway. They also recognised that they would need to consider appropriate research for their purpose and context to guide their inquiry.

HOW DID THEY GO ABOUT CONSIDERING APPROPRIATE RESEARCH?

When searching for relevant and appropriate research about engagement in an online maths class for gifted students, Tony found that “*there wasn't a huge amount of research about engagement in online teaching outside of the pandemic.*” As a result, some of the research they found “*wasn't completely matched to our context*” of teaching gifted mathematics students online.

Given this lack of immediate access to appropriate research on engagement in an online setting, Bree drew on her networks in the gifted education community which provided journals, newsletters and conferences, to access research that focused more broadly on engagement and gifted education. The team considered a range of relevant research literature, including Ronksley-Pavia and Neumann's article [Conceptualising Gifted Student \(Dis\) Engagement through the Lens of Learner \(Re\) Engagement](#); Berry's book [Reimagining Student Engagement](#); Lanevsky and Keighley's article [To produce or not to produce? Understanding boredom and the honor in underachievement](#); and Berry's article [Disrupting to Driving: Exploring upper primary teachers' perspectives on student engagement](#).

Through engaging with this research literature, Tony, Bree and Richard found different models of engagement which helped them to understand and identify markers of engagement. Through the coaching sessions as part of the professional learning course and their team discussions, they considered Ronksley-Pavia and Neumann's model which conceptualises engagement as consisting of behavioural, affective, cognitive and social aspects. Richard commented that “*this model did appeal to us, but then... we found another model, which is from Amy Berry, which is the idea of engagement being on a spectrum from disrupting to driving, and that seemed to really resonate with us.*” In particular, Bree liked the way that Berry's model focused on “*students taking responsibility for their engagement as well ... it wasn't just something that teachers took responsibility for or did to the students- we don't just engage the students, but we actually engage in a partnership with them.*”

They then presented Berry's model at a curriculum day to the other teachers who work in the high ability program, to get their feedback about it and how they thought it related to their context. Through engaging with their colleagues, Tony, Bree and Richard teachers were ensuring that the research was appropriate and applicable to the particular context of this school and program. Through reading the research about engagement, they developed the following questions to ask their colleagues:

- How do you know that your students are engaged?
- What does it look/sound like?
- What are some aspects of engagement that are unique to our context?
- What are some less obvious ways that students show they are engaged?


TONY, BREE AND RICHARD'S CASE STUDY: CONSIDERING APPROPRIATE RESEARCH

Richard noted that *"we didn't mandate that they use [Amy Berry's] continuum, but it really resonated with the team, this idea [of conceptualising engagement ranging] from disruption all the way to driving, and we could identify different markers that we thought we might be able to use as a way for us to identify whether our students are engaged, and not only that, for our students as well to identify whether they are engaged."*

Berry's model presents a continuum from engagement to disengagement. However, the team at the online school recognised that in their high ability context, engagement could be conceptualised as 'horseshoe' rather than a 'straight line'. Richard reflected that *"our gifted disrupters could actually be bored potential drivers. And that really resonated with us ... if we can work out why they are disrupting- it could be that they are bored, or the challenge level isn't right ... they could be potential drivers of engagement"*.

Through their engagement with the research and considering their context, an *"aha moment"* occurred as they recognised that *"compliance doesn't necessarily equal engagement. Just because a student isn't mucking up, just because they are doing what we tell them, doesn't necessarily mean that they are engaged"*. As a result, under-achievement can be hidden. Bree reflected that *"teachers need to be empowered... [and] we need to work with our teachers to be able to identify [this]."*

To do so, Tony, Bree and Richard then synthesised the models of engagement so they could be applied to their context. Bree reflected that *"particularly with gifted learners, we really want to engage them in driving their own learning, which is the ultimate in engagement"*. This requires explicit discussion with the students themselves about taking responsibility for their own engagement, rather than it being only the responsibility of teachers.

 "[Engagement is] actually a partnership- so that was one key thing that came out to us [from the research]."

WHY DID THEY CHOOSE THIS APPROACH?

Tony, Bree and Richard chose this approach because they wanted to introduce their colleagues to appropriate research about engagement and support them to understand how it related to their context. Bree reflected that *"different people [will] have different capacity to digest the research"* and *"the idea of actually bringing it and making it understandable and digestible to your community"* was an important one. However, through the professional learning course, she learned that *"you actually can go to the primary research as well ... you don't have to ... shy away from that. Not everybody will want to get into it ... let's teach up and if people can't access it, then let's scaffold it when we need to."*


Drawing on her understanding of the gifted research broadly, Bree also recognised that gifted students need to be challenged, which could impact on engagement. She commented that students needed to *"understand that it's important to struggle, it's important, where kids who normally have success all the time, actually need to experience [that]. [It] can be ... a cognitive thing. But it can also be an emotional thing, too. So having that explicit discussion with them."* In this way, Bree drew on the research about gifted students into her thinking about engagement and how she could enhance student agency in the classroom.

In reflecting on what they had learned from the professional learning course, Bree explained how it empowered her and her colleagues to try new things in their professional development: *"normally you wouldn't get really adventurous with what you're looking at. But we actually got into some primary [research] ... [we looked at a] doctoral thesis, which has got some really wonderful frameworks, underpinning ideas behind concept mapping, and also just an overview of gifted education and all the models. Normally, you wouldn't tackle something that big, but we're thinking now well, let's do it ... I think that's an outcome of how our confidence to actually bring it to the team has [grown]."*

Looking forward to their next steps, Tony, Bree and Richard are planning to engage with further literature and their own action research to collate illustrations of what successful engagement and disengagement looks like in the gifted online classroom. They are also looking to supplement this with a collection of research-informed strategies for fostering student-driven engagement in their context. One such strategy that they are keen to explore is the use of online polling tools.

TONY, BREE AND RICHARD'S CASE STUDY: CONSIDERING APPROPRIATE RESEARCH

These illustrations and strategies will then be used in the development of the engagement tool as initially envisioned at the beginning of their project. Informed by their current engagement with Berry's model and the wider literature, Bree commented that a key driving principle behind these future efforts is to *"make students aware of their agency and engagement ... and figure out whether there is a disconnect between what teachers are perceiving and what students are perceiving."*

 *"This model [from the research] has really highlighted to us how we can improve our practice in quite a meaningful way."*

Another strategy they are planning to explore further in their classes in 2023 is encouraging students to think metacognitively about their own learning process. Tony reflected that he will use his understanding of the research about engagement to think about *"how it might change what I'm doing in the classroom. And I suppose one early thing is to probably introduce language with the students about engagement, and make it really explicit ... what we might mean by engagement"*. He explained that he expects this to support his students to *"be curious about the work [they're] doing"* and help to reinforce the expectation that *"we're looking for beyond just completing the set tasks."*

Overall, this team of teachers found that their discussions together were very beneficial for refining their focus on the issue they wanted to investigate. Their collaboration with their colleagues in the wider school community also helped to foster wider buy-in, as teachers were consulted about whether the research was appropriate for their particular context and how it could be applicable. Bree commented that *"I think [it] is really important [to work] collaboratively with people in whatever your context is. So that you're not a lone voice and that you're always building capacity."*

KEY LEARNINGS

1. **A key aspect of determining whether research is appropriate involves carefully considering whether the research is relevant to the school context:** Tony, Bree and Richard were mindful of the factors that made their context unique. For this reason, when accessing research about online engagement, they consulted multiple bodies of literature that they considered to be relevant. They then synthesised the findings from this research to communicate it to their colleagues. [How do you assess whether research is relevant to your school context?](#)
2. **Discussion and collaboration about research findings enable educators to understand the purpose and value of a research-informed initiative and how it applies to their context:** Tony, Bree and Richard found it very useful to work together to find, read and understand the research. They also collaborated with their other colleagues to discuss how the research was relevant to their context. [What opportunities for discussing research are there in your school? How could discussions with your colleagues deepen your understanding of appropriate research? What would you ask them?](#)
3. **Through accessing appropriate research, these teachers were empowered to bring together an approach to engagement that suited their context:** Once they found research that was appropriate for the practice problem they wanted to address, these teachers also extended and adapted the research to better suit their context. By adapting Berry's engagement model, they established a contextually-relevant and rigorous model for their context that then laid the foundation for their next steps for trialling strategies to generate student-driven engagement.

TONY, BREE AND RICHARD'S CASE STUDY: CONSIDERING APPROPRIATE RESEARCH

HOW DOES TONY, BREE AND RICHARD'S STORY LINK TO OUR QUALITY USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE (QURE) FRAMEWORK?

This practitioner story connects with the core component of **research evidence needing to be appropriate** and the individual enabling component of **skillsets**. These teachers found multiple sources of research that could be adapted to their context and then shared and discussed how it could be implemented with their colleagues.

You can find out more about the core component of appropriate research evidence 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.