

TERESA'S CASE STUDY: DEVELOPING RESEARCH USE THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

This practitioner story shares the journey of Teresa (Research Lead and instructional coach), Gina (Deputy Principal), James (Learning Area Lead and Instructional coach) and Charlotte (VCE Teacher) as they completed the Monash Q project's professional learning course *Using Research Well in Practice*. Their story highlights three key learnings that you could consider in relation to your own work:

1. ***Emphasising the importance of context is key to any professional learning about using research.***
2. ***Using examples of how research can be implemented in schools to address a particular issue is an important way to develop teacher buy-in.***
3. ***Professional learning can assist teachers to develop their skillsets and mindsets about the centrality of research use to their work, rather than it being perceived as an 'add on'.***

WHAT WAS THE CONTEXT?

Camino College is a large co-educational secondary Catholic school located in Melbourne. Over the past two years, Camino has been developing the use of research as part of their school culture.

Over the past two years, Teresa has played a key role in developing the research use culture at Camino. When Teresa 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"*. Teresa attributed this to a lack of research use skills and access to research as well as a mindset that research use was seen as 'another thing' that is required of teachers.



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 professional learning program *Using Research Well in Practice*, which is part of the Monash Q project. A vertical team of staff from Camino volunteered to be involved: Gina, Deputy Principal of Learning and Teaching; Teresa, Research Lead and an instructional coach; James, Head of Learning (ICT) and an instructional coach; and Charlotte, a VCE Maths and VCAL teacher.

Since 2020, Teresa has held the position of Research Lead at Camino after being 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 school and student outcomes.

As part of her Research Lead role, Teresa was keen to develop her professional skills and knowledge about research use through undertaking this professional development program. As a school leader, Gina wanted to be involved so she could support her staff to be more research engaged, as well as develop her own skills. As a learning leader and an instructional coach, James was interested in learning more about translating research into practice so he can model this for his staff. As a teacher, Charlotte described herself as a beginner in her research use journey, and was keen to learn more about how to use research as part of enhancing her teaching practice.

WHAT WAS THE FOCUS?

The 10-week professional learning program *Using Research Well in Practice* consisted of self-guided Modules about understanding research quality and types, accessing quality research, appraising research for rigour and relevance, engaging with and implementing

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research well, and supporting and embedding quality research use. It also involved a project, where participants from each school or organisation chose a particular issue in their school they thought would benefit from being informed by research. Coaching was provided by the Monash Q team to support the participants in their projects, as well as three webinars and the QURE Assessment Tool to measure research use growth over the course.

The professional learning program emphasised the importance of considering how research use works in the context of a particular school, as a tool to inform decision making. Gina found the course useful because *“what we're trying to do here is align everything with our strategic plan around continuous school improvement. So this [professional learning course about research use] was ideal”*.

For the Camino team, the emphasis on context in the professional learning course was key. Teresa explained that *“the modules were highly beneficial, because they really emphasised the importance of relevance and the contextualization of research. And I feel that ... reflects my experience on the ground. There's a whole lot of research available, but if it's not relevant to what we're doing, and we don't try to make it fit where we're at, then it will flop and won't have the success we'd hoped for.”*



Similarly, Charlotte felt that sometimes when she does professional development courses *“I'm sitting there going, this is not going to work in my school ... So I really liked that [Using Research Well in Practice] emphasised the [importance of contextual factors]”*. Therefore, these teachers emphasised that professional learning about using research has to be grounded and translated into the context of the school in order to be meaningful and applicable to their practice.

HOW DID THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH USE AT CAMINO?

The four participants from Camino found the combination of videos, readings, activities, quizzes, case studies and discussions in the course modules to be very helpful in developing their skills and mindsets about using research, as these resources gave them a range of different ways to access the materials and prompt their thinking. For example, the team found it helpful to learn about the different types and sources of research in the Module 'Understanding research quality and types'. Prior to completing the course, Teresa felt that *“when I read about qualitative and quantitative [research], I actually don't know what that's about. So I think we need to be up-skilled in just what we will probably be exposed to in academic research”*.




“Now when I read ... research [including in the newspaper and in podcasts] I'm looking at it through a different lens”.

Charlotte particularly liked the Module about 'Appraising research for rigour and relevance', which included annotations to a journal article indicating how to break down each section of the article and analyse it, as she found this to be a challenging part of using research. When Charlotte completed the QURE Assessment Tool at the end of the course, she found that she had improved on all the measures, but *“interesting ... not a great level in terms of the skills. I just think because I didn't practice the skills ... And I think one reason was we just didn't have time”*.

In 2022, Camino introduced data dashboards as a way of being able to track and report on student growth, so that teaching could be better targeted towards the individual needs of students. This data reflected what the teachers had perceived from their teaching experience, namely that each class at Camino had a very wide spread of levels of student achievement. For their project as part of this professional learning program, the team chose to focus on Teresa's Year 9 maths class in Term 2 as a pilot to investigate whether differentiated instruction about linear equations helped to develop a growth mindset and increase student confidence about maths. This topic also aligned with Camino's improvement focus on data-informed practice, and on mitigating learning loss that has occurred due to Covid lockdowns in Victoria.


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Using what they had learned in the course about accessing and appraising research in *Using Research Well in Practice*, Teresa drew on research such as the NSW Department of Education's document [What Works Best](#) about the use of data to inform practice; the Education Endowment Foundation's guidance report on [Special Education Needs in Mainstream Schools](#); Carol Dweck's work on growth mindsets; Carol Tomlinson's work on [The Differentiated Classroom](#); as well as the Vic DET [High Impact Teaching Strategies](#) about differentiated teaching. These resources were uploaded to the schools' professional learning hub on their learning management system.

 "Our research resources were intentionally chosen for their simplicity ... because we want to share them with all staff and encourage them to be used."

Using the data dashboard, Teresa could track the average mark achieved by her students over maths tasks completed in Years 7, 8 and 9 that used the key algebraic skills required to understand linear equations. Using this information, Teresa and the Camino team developed three different sets of coursework (pitched at high, medium and low performing students) about linear equations for Teresa's Year 9 maths classroom. These resources incorporated the strategies recommended by the research, such as scaffolding, explicit instruction, technology, metacognitive thinking and flexible groupings. Students were then allocated to a group based on their prior level of achievement, and each group watched a video of Teresa explaining the topic which was pitched at their level. The videos and written materials included clear instructions and the slow release of information which encouraged students to pause, complete worked examples and answer recap questions. This method of delivery allowed Teresa to move around the room assisting each group as questions arose, rather than standing at the front of the room with one set of instructions and activities for all students.

The Camino team is in the process of measuring the impact of their project on student outcomes, through comparing the students' actual results with their expected grades. Teresa observed students displaying greater engagement and positivity about mathematics classes as a result of the differentiated approach. From Gina's perspective, *"what Teresa really was able to facilitate was success and confidence in these students"*. Teresa's approach enabled these students to have an entry point into the content about linear equations that was within their Zone of Proximal Development ([Vygotsky](#)), which they were unable to access otherwise due to a lack of foundational knowledge. Through *"pushing them just enough, but still within what they can achieve, engagement levels really increased"*.

 "Our overall hope is to encourage similar projects where staff are using research to inform decision making".

The four members of the Camino team who were involved in the professional learning program *Using Research Well in Practice* found the emphasis on using research in ways that suited their purpose and context to be a helpful framework. When the Camino team looked at the research about differentiation and streamed learning groups, they found there was conflicting research about its efficacy and impact, and that mixed ability groupings could also be another effective way of improving student outcomes, which they want to investigate further in the future. The team also found it useful to meet together to unpack how research about differentiation aligned with their professional experience at their school. Teresa explained that she *"just wanted to essentially be a guinea pig for this process, because we are also challenging mindsets around what's possible in a classroom"* through differentiation.

The team also appreciated the opportunity to discuss the role of research use with educators from other schools and with members of the Q team as part of the coaching sessions. James explained how *"It's very easy ... to just work in your individual silo or small team [rather than] looking outside of your school [and] having that link there to what other schools were doing"*. The Camino team therefore valued hearing about examples of how other teachers were using research in their schools through the course.

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM ABOUT RESEARCH-USE?

Teresa wanted to complete the professional learning program because *"I felt like it was very important to walk the talk"* as a research lead, rather than just supporting other staff to do it. Teresa appreciated that she had the strong support of Gina and the school principal,

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who encouraged her to experiment and 'have a go': *"We're 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".* Gina, in her role as Deputy Principal Teaching and Learning, thought it was important that she be involved in the professional learning program too 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 saw the project as a helpful way of piloting the use of research in her practice. She also shared what she learned through 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:

"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".

However, the team at Camino reflected that there was some reluctance from other teachers who questioned the relevance of undergoing a professional learning course about research use. Some teachers questioned Charlotte about why she was undertaking such an extensive professional development program, 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".* James conceptualises research use as a way of *"empowering [teachers] to be involved in the delivery".* However, he also recognises that undertaking professional learning about using research can be perceived by teachers as an 'add on', rather than being a core part of their work. James felt that they needed to *"look 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".*



The Camino team recognises that while they have made some great progress in their research use journey over the past few years, especially with a very supportive leadership team, access to professional learning and the ongoing position of a Research Lead, there is still some way to go. James reflected that *"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".*

Teresa has identified some barriers that exist to creating a research-use culture in their school, including change fatigue amongst teachers, a lack of time for teachers to engage in research and the lack of an integrated framework for research use across the school. In the future, the Camino team are considering ways in which professional learning focused on using research 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 for all teachers across the school. Gina commented that *"what I'm looking for is more time for staff to talk about their practice".* 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'. But ... if it was built into your timetable ... you're all involved in, collectively, some research and or whatever it is that we're working on ... it becomes part of your role [rather than] being seen as this 'extra'."*

Therefore, the team at Camino are examining how they can further foster the use of research by teachers in their practice, through professional learning, collaboration and infrastructure support.

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KEY LEARNINGS

- 1. *Emphasising the importance of context is key to any professional learning about research use:*** The team at Camino believe that professional learning about research use needs to emphasise the particular context of a school environment when using research to inform decision making. *What are the particular aspects of your school context which need to be considered when using research? What data and information would you draw on to describe the context?*
- 2. *Using examples of how research can be implemented in schools to address a particular issue is an important way to develop teacher buy-in:*** Seeing examples of research-informed strategies can enable teachers to see how research is relevant to their everyday work. *What examples of research use can you draw on to demonstrate to teachers how research can be used in practical ways to improve student outcomes? Do you think this would help to gain teacher buy in?*
- 3. *Professional learning can assist teachers to develop their skillsets and mindsets about the centrality of research use to their work, rather than it being perceived as an 'add on':*** The team at Camino believe that research use is central to the work of teachers, and that professional learning programs can provide the time and space to help them develop their skillsets and mindsets about research use. *How can your school support teachers to further develop their skillsets and mindsets about research use? What role could professional learning play?*

HOW DOES TERESA'S STORY LINK TO OUR QUALITY USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE (QURE) FRAMEWORK?

This practitioner case study about **professional learning** connects with the core component of the QURE Framework that quality use of research evidence requires thoughtful engagement with and implementation of research that is appropriate. At this school, involvement in professional learning also increased the individual enabling component of skillsets in how teachers use research, and challenged mindsets about what is possible in terms of using research to address challenges within schools.

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.