

Aims of the project

This project was essentially about what it is that supports a school to become research-engaged. There were two dimensions to this investigation:

(i) The aim of the specific research activity at school level was:

- To investigate the impact of rhyme and rhythm on the development of speaking and listening skills in Key Stage 1

(ii) Beyond the specific research at school level, the overarching aim was:

- To investigate the features of research engagement in the school which were significant in supporting and enabling the research activity

Dimensions of the study

In 2003, Graham Handscomb and John MacBeath (*The Research-engaged School*, Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003) identified four main features of a research-engaged school:

- a research orientation
- a 'research rich' pedagogy
- promotion of a research community
- research was at the heart of school policy and practice

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) set out to explore these ideas with schools that were interested in becoming research-engaged. Hatfield Peverel Infant School joined the NFER programme in order to engage with this wider perspective and insight.

Hatfield Peverel Infant School is a Community school in a semi-rural location with 180 places for pupils aged 4-7 years. It works closely with its on-site private Day Nursery and adjoining Junior School.

The core research team comprised the Head Teacher, Foundation Stage Manager and the Maths Subject Manager and worked closely with Essex Local Authority and the NFER.

The researchers identified a focus group of 10 pupils who had just started in the Reception year. Information from families and staff as well as pupils, gave us an initial insight into their knowledge of traditional rhymes.

Summary of main findings

Our outcomes showed an ongoing decline in people's experience of

traditional rhymes over time. The rhyme and rhythm programme we introduced appeared to have a positive impact on:

- pupils' motivation, especially in relation to their interest in poetry; and
- the development of their speaking and listening skills.

Our school-level enquiry gave us a powerful insight into learning and enabled us to apply this knowledge in order to extend and sustain curriculum opportunities which incorporate rhyme and rhythm.

We found that some features of research-engaged schools were already in existence in our school culture and we needed to recognise them and to develop them further. Other features emerged for the first time as a consequence of research engagement.

The evidence suggests that research engagement depends on a combination of support including:

- dedicated resources;
- access to advice;
- collaborative teamwork;
- committed leadership;

The enquiring school: Using action research to enhance Key Stage 1 pupils' speaking and listening

Marrie Webster, Marilyn Cook and
Graham Handscomb

Hatfield Peverel Infant School & Essex
Local Authority

- a supportive school culture; and
- a resolve to grow research communities within and beyond the school.

Background and context

Whilst the school had experienced a successful inspection (graded 'good' overall) we wanted it to become 'excellent' overall. We agreed that to do this we needed to inject new dimensions into our work with pupils. This decision was the catalyst that led to our involvement in the Research-Engaged Schools project.

The project enabled Hatfield Peverel Infant School to explore the process of developing as a research-engaged school through the focus of the role of rhyme and rhythm in developing speaking and listening skills. The project had two dimensions:

- a particular investigation into speaking and listening skills at Key Stage 1; and
- identifying and exploring the features of research engagement in the school that were significant factors in supporting and enabling this research activity.

The school worked with Essex Local Authority and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) on this project. The project was part of a national initiative: *Investigating the Research-Engaged School* which was sponsored by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), National College for School Leadership (NCSL), the General Teaching Council for England (GTC), the Local Government Association (LGA) and five Local Authorities, including Essex.

The focus on speaking and listening skills came from a whole staff concern that pupils' skills were weakening in these areas and that this was a crucial aspect of development which impacted directly on personal achievement and attainment. We hypothesised that children in general were not learning as many traditional rhymes and felt that this was a significant element of early learning worthy of further investigation.

Teaching processes and strategies

How did we investigate the impact of rhyme and rhythm?

- We planned twice-weekly sessions with the target group of ten pupils in their first year, focusing on rhythmic activities, action songs and games. We asked colleagues to be involved in implementing the activities. Children recited rhymes daily, often clapping out the rhythms in words and phrases and were encouraged to make up their own. Poetry was used more than before in whole class sessions; pupils were encouraged to learn poems by heart and to recite them aloud. We bought in an African Drumming Workshop and a Samba Workshop so that all children could 'feel' the passion of the presenters and play the instruments under their direction. We even adopted a new system of teaching letter sounds which involves catchy songs and rhythms



How did we support research activity in our school?

- We made good use of expertise and guidance offered by LA advisors, NFER mentors and the NCSL, especially in the early days when we needed moral support
- We discussed and agreed our focus with school colleagues to ensure its relevance for us. Subsequently, we refined it through discussion with our mentors and colleagues at local schools
- From the start, we shared everything that was happening with staff, governors and parents through newsletters, meetings and general conversation
- As the project progressed, we tried to find, allocate and finance appropriate blocks of time for the core researchers to be able to work together on the project
- Colleagues included rhymes and rhythmic activities in their daily planning, which provided opportunities for us to compare classes

The findings

What did we learn about the impact of rhyme and rhythm on speaking and listening skills at Key Stage 1?

The questionnaires showed that adults aged fifty years plus had an extensive knowledge of traditional rhymes. This knowledge was increasingly less evident as the age of the adults decreased. This trend continued into our Reception Year where pupils demonstrated a limited knowledge and experience of rhymes. We noted that girls knew more rhymes than boys. After the questionnaire stage, we noticed that families began to talk about and use rhymes more often as they became aware of our enquiry.

Taped conversations with the ten focus children at intervals throughout the Key Stage provided a fascinating insight into their individual progress in speaking and listening skills, especially in the case of pupils with speech and language difficulties and those

from other cultural backgrounds. In some cases, this enabled us to provide earlier interventions to support pupils than may otherwise have been the case.

By the time they reached Year 2, pupils were showing a boundless enthusiasm for poetry and rhymes across the two classes in the year group. Their Year 2 teachers, including Beverly Thompson who was one of the researchers, were struck by their marked interest in learning lengthy poems by heart and reciting them to others. The motivation continued beyond school hours; one boy chose to recite a long poem in a summer holiday competition and won! Another wrote his own poem at home about the Great Fire of London topic he'd studied in school and won a prize in a local newspaper competition. This widespread engagement with poetry was not typical of previous cohorts and teachers' comments strongly supported our view that the extra input of rhyme and rhythm had impacted very positively on their attitudes and achievement.

Speaking and listening summative assessments in 2006 showed nearly double the number of pupils attaining Level three (41%) than in the previous year (22%).

We noted that the love of poetry and rhyme has continued in subsequent year groups; it is likely that they too were enthused by participation in class and whole school activities introduced in the course of our work with our original, targeted pupils.

What did we discover about the features that supported the school to carry out the research and fostered further research engagement for the longer term?

We identified a number of factors that supported research activities including:

School leaders championed the research

A key factor was the support and enthusiasm of the head teacher which underpinned the initial engagement with research and enquiry as a way of developing the school's existing culture of collaborative enquiry.

Relevance: research focused on impact on teaching and learning

Teachers felt empowered by the freedom to explore issues they felt to be directly relevant to their pupils' needs and their daily work. As the project evolved, this led to increased confidence in using research skills to inform and to develop their practice. During the research process, teachers themselves became learners again and this enabled them to empathise with pupils' feelings and learning processes when meeting new challenges.

Teacher researchers had mentoring support

We found that it was invaluable to have access to our mentors, especially at first when we found it hard to narrow our focus. Input from the local authority and prestigious national bodies gave our work status and provided coherence to it.

The school devoted resources to research

We found the key resources to be time and money. Without these,

the valuable processes which are such important factors in professional development couldn't take place.



Meetings were used to facilitate discussions and convey information to staff and governors. The wider school community read about our activities in the school newsletter and the local press.

There was flexibility for teachers to share curriculum activities e.g. 'Talk Partner' arrangements across our school and with our partner Junior School. Some expenditure was accommodated e.g. an African Drumming workshop, a Samba workshop and practical resources such as new poetry materials.

Research activity was recognised as professional development

We viewed the research engagement as a professional development tool. Teachers were motivated by being given ownership of the research secure in the knowledge that support was available. The focus they chose was relevant to their work and they gradually felt more at ease about stepping away from their teaching routines in order to meet and work together when necessary.

It was especially important to the core researchers that their work was valued as a school priority. This acknowledgement was a key factor in their professional development and had a positive and sustained impact on their personal esteem and demeanour.

What impact did the research have on the school as a whole?

The school developed its capacity for research:

A key benefit for the school was the opportunity to be involved in the process of research as much as arriving at outcomes and working in teams was important. We discovered that action research was more accessible than we had imagined and that our existing skills and ways of thinking could be reconceived as research activities.

The school has increased its capacity for research through our belief that it would help us to introduce a fresh and challenging perspective to our work.

We didn't want the core researchers to be seen as an elite group so we avoided this by sharing progress and by seeking others' views. Without this approach, the school's capacity to develop its research culture might have been curtailed. This approach has borne fruit as others have since begun research scenarios and turned to their colleagues for the kind of support that they once provided.

The experience has enabled us to instigate enquiry scenarios with increased insight and confidence, linking them more readily to whole school planning and improvement aims.

Research methods

Our findings were based on the collation of feedback from

questionnaires circulated to families and staff, taped conversations with children and insight from data we collected about children's pre-school experiences. Throughout the research we noted observations made by staff about children's responses and ongoing development.

Conclusions

Our school-based research confirmed the fundamental importance of rhyme and rhythm as factors in the development of children's speaking and listening skills. We attributed pupils' enthusiasm for and enjoyment of poetry as they entered Year 2 to the earlier emphasis placed on rhyme and rhythm over time. This has informed our decisions about curriculum provision and planning, leading to the introduction of a range of specific activities which support the inclusion of rhythm and rhyme in learning.

The project raised our awareness of the need for time and money to release staff from classrooms to work collaboratively even though this can be difficult. It became clear that provision for this type of activity needs to be incorporated into strategic planning at both school and Local Authority levels to enrich continuous professional development.

A significant consequence of our research has been the involvement of many other staff at all levels in wider professional involvement beyond the school. This experience has shown that, by extending our professional confidence and skills, we were able to enrich the quality of our work. Looking back to our desire to widen our perspectives, our experiences have moved the school forward, furnishing us with fresh insights and broadening the range of strategies we use to support pupils' needs.

The research showed that becoming a research-engaged school was not just about what we did but more significantly about how we made it happen.

Recommendations and further questions

Advice we would give to others contemplating a similar scenario:

- Does your school culture support collaborative work? How could this be developed to support a research activity? Can you allocate appropriate blocks of time for the research and meet any resource costs?
- Is this type of work recognised as contributing to staff development? Will it be given the status it deserves?
- Is your research question relevant to learning and teaching aims and development in your school?
- Will there be opportunities to foster pupil/teacher dialogue through the research?

- Will the researchers have access to mentoring support and advice?
- How will the process and its outcomes be shared within the school and with the wider community?
- How will research engagement be sustained over time?
- How confident and ambitious are you about the chosen line of enquiry? Will it help you to support pupil achievement?

Suggestions for further reading

Handscomb G and MacBeath J (2003) *The Research-engaged School*. Forum for Learning and Research/Enquiry (FLARE)

Handscomb G, Sharp C and Webster M (2006) *Broadening Horizons: the Research-engaged School*. International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI); Fort Lauderdale, Florida; January 2006.

Sharp C; Eames A; Saunders D and Tomlinson K (2005) *Challenging the ivory tower of research: investigating the role of rhyme in speaking and listening*, Chapter 2 in Postcards from Research-Engaged Schools. NFER

Sharp C with Handscomb G (2007) *Making Research Make a Difference* Essex County Council Forum for Learning and Research/Enquiry (FLARE)

Forum for Learning and Research/Enquiry (FLARE) Essex
website: www.essexflare.org

Authors' contact details:

Marrie Webster, Marilyn Cook and Graham Handscomb
Hatfield Peverel Infant School and Essex Local Authority

e-mail:

marriew1234@aol.com

admin@hatfieldpeverel.essex.sch.uk

graham.handscomb@essex.co.uk



This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2008, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research.

All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

This publication has been supported by the DCSF Gender Agenda.

To find out more please email: research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk