



Last Collection Time

# Postcards from research- engaged schools

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# Postcards from research-engaged schools

Becoming a research-engaged school involves setting out on a journey of discovery – a journey that provides exciting opportunities for new insights, experiences and relationships.

Fifteen primary and secondary schools made a commitment to put research at the heart of their work. Their local education authorities and a team of researchers at the NFER supported them, and this book is the result. It presents ‘postcards’ from the journeys made by the teachers in these schools. Schools chose their own research topics and approached their research in different ways. Teachers involved in the research said that a research-engaged school is like a:

- treasure box – exciting, the deeper you dig, the more you find
- jar of sweets, filled up of lots of good things, you just have to find a way to get them out and have them.

*Postcards from research-engaged schools* is only £25.00 (inc. p&p). The following pages show a sample extract from the book. An order form follows the extract.



## Teamwork proves a key to success in evaluating the impact of early learning

### *Field Place First School*

Field Place First School in Worthing, West Sussex caters for over 300 pupils from the ages of three to eight. A high proportion of children attending the school come from less advantaged backgrounds. Their research looked at three of the school's strategies for intervention in the early years.

The headteacher, Frances Dunkin, saw the NFER programme as an opportunity to continue the school's existing involvement with research. She explained her view that research has an important part to play in teaching: 'As professionals, we have to know where our knowledge comes from. Teachers shouldn't just *do* things, they need to reflect and ask questions.' Frances has consistently encouraged her colleagues to be involved in research, for example by taking part in national or local research projects and through studying for professional qualifications.

### Does early intervention make a difference?

Frances discussed the school's possible involvement with the NFER programme in a staff meeting. She was keen to involve some of the newer members of staff who had not yet had the opportunity to be involved in research. Andrew Simpson (key stage 2 coordinator) and Lucy Payne (nursery

teacher) agreed to take part. They decided to investigate the impact of three interventions on children's learning. The interventions selected for study were: the Early Literacy Strategy (ELS); a family learning scheme and attending the school's own nursery. Andrew and Lucy took the main responsibility for gathering the information, with Frances acted as a supporter and critical friend.

The team used a mixture of methods to investigate their research questions, including a literature review, an analysis of test results, and interviews with parents involved in the family learning scheme. They started by looking at the findings from relevant research. Lucy had already attended a presentation by researcher Iram Siraj-Blatchford, who shared results from a national study of influences on young children's progress. The NFER Library compiled a list of other research studies, which Lucy obtained and shared out among the team. Each team member took responsibility for reading their material and reporting back to their colleagues.

The literature review helped identify some issues that the team could follow up in their own research. For example, it indicated that children from poorer families may have less access to books at home and are therefore likely to be more reliant on the school to develop their literacy skills. It suggested that good quality pre-school experience helped children to make progress at school. It also highlighted the importance of parental involvement and suggested that schools could become more proactive in involving parents in their children's education.

Lucy and Andrew decided to gather some basic information about the children attending Field Place First. In particular, they wanted to identify which children had taken part in the three initiatives and to consider the assessment results of these children (baseline assessments, foundation stage profile and key stage assessment results). This proved more difficult and time consuming than they expected, but at last they were able to draw up a table containing the relevant information. Andrew used this to produce a series of bar charts, comparing the results of children who had taken part in each initiative with those of similar children who had not. Although the number of children in the sample was small, some patterns began to emerge. As might be expected, children who had higher baseline scores tended to achieve higher scores at the end of key stage 1. Attending the school's own nursery seemed to be associated with higher baseline scores. Some of the children who attended the nursery and had taken part in the ELS went on to achieve high scores in their key stage 1 assessments. Few children with low baseline scores had been involved in the family learning scheme.

Interviews with parents involved in the family learning scheme indicated that they thought both parents and children had benefited from their involvement. Parents felt it had given them a sense of achievement and helped them to help their children. One mother said: ‘It’s boosted my confidence and it was really nice for me to spend quality time with my son.’ Another said: ‘It’s made my daughter a bit more confident and I’ve found that she is now prepared to try harder.’

## Sharing results

During staff meetings the team kept their colleagues updated on progress. They presented the results of their project to the rest of the staff during a school training day. This provoked considerable debate, with colleagues showing an interest in several different aspects of the research. As a result, the school has decided to develop its tracking system to enable staff to monitor children’s progress more effectively. Colleagues also raised questions about whether the family learning scheme was targeted on the right children and what the school might do to involve parents who were ‘hard to reach’.

## Playing to their strengths

The research team identified a number of things that had helped them with their research. First, working in a team was important and allowed them to play to their strengths. Andrew was interested in quantitative analysis, so he was happy to work on the test results, whereas Lucy was much more interested in qualitative methods, so she worked on the parent interviews. Frances was a key supporter, always on hand to offer advice. The team benefited from some non-contact time to carry out the work, discuss progress and devote time to analysing their data. Keeping a well-organised research file was invaluable, especially when they came to compile the report. They also found the support and structure supplied by the NFER programme helpful in keeping them focused and providing opportunities to discuss their project with NFER researchers and other schools.

## Teaching, reflection and personal growth

Reflecting on their experience of the research, Andrew and Lucy felt it had had a profound effect on them. As Andrew said: ‘Doing this research made

me realise what being a learner is like again. I think to be a really good teacher you have to be a good learner yourself.’ Lucy felt she had gained in skills and confidence as a result of her involvement:

*As my understanding grew, I definitely became more confident and I felt I was really contributing something to the team. It has renewed my interest in learning. I am now eager to gain more credits towards my Masters. I would love to be able to do more early-years research because I just find it fascinating.*

Somewhat to her surprise, Lucy found that she enjoyed reading about national research findings. She has therefore decided to subscribe to a journal featuring research in the early years.

## Keeping up the momentum

The school is committed to continuing its involvement in research. Their LEA contact has invited Lucy to share her enthusiasm about research with other schools in the authority. Lucy is full of ideas for her next piece of research. Meanwhile her colleagues are about to begin a new research project on children’s writing, in partnership with Exeter University.

## Order form



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