

# The role of school-based research champions in a school–university partnership

Katharine Burn<sup>a\*</sup> , Robin Conway<sup>b</sup>, Anne Edwards<sup>a</sup>  and Eluned Harries<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Oxford, UK; <sup>b</sup>John Mason School, Abingdon, UK; <sup>c</sup>Matthew Arnold School, Middlesex, UK

The value of teachers' engagement in and with research is long recognised and it is acknowledged that school–university research partnerships are one way of enabling such engagement. But we know little about how research-based knowledge is negotiated into school practices. Here we draw on data from nine 'research champions', who are teachers in schools which are part of the Oxford Education Deanery, a research partnership with a university department. Taking a cultural/historical approach, the study examined the strategic intentions and actions in the activities of the champions as they negotiated research-based knowledge into their schools. Data comprised 59 completed templates that described what they did and why. Findings revealed differences between those with close links with senior leaders—who could take a whole-school approach—and those whose reach was restricted by their position in school practices. Nonetheless, all the champions carefully selected and targeted research in ways that reflected their knowledge of local contexts. The findings point to the need to incorporate the champion role into school systems and for universities to value the role as they develop their own research agenda.

**Keywords:** cultural/historical; partnership; school practices; teacher research

## Introduction

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) and Royal Society of Arts (RSA) report on research and the teaching profession concluded that a systemic response was needed to ensure that the benefits for students and teachers of the profession's engagement in and with research become widespread (BERA-RSA, 2014). In this article we briefly outline one systemic response, involving a university and local schools, and focus on the work of teachers who are designated as 'research champion' within their schools.

The context of the study is the Oxford Education Deanery, henceforth the Deanery (Fancourt *et al.*, 2015). The Deanery was set up as a system that recognised and made visible the different expertise to be found across the University of Oxford's Department of Education and the schools in the Oxford Internship Programme. This

\*Corresponding author. Department of Education, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY, UK. Email: katharine.burn@education.ox.ac.uk

programme is a 1-year Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), resulting in qualified teacher status. In common with other English university-run programmes, it operates as a partnership with the schools where student teachers undertake two extended placements. The Deanery started with eight Oxford schools when it was formally launched in 2013, and has grown as other partner schools have seen the advantages of involvement in this more extended form of collaboration.

The Deanery comprises three broad areas of linked activity: initial teacher education (ITE); continuing professional development (CPD), which engages schools in and with research; and university-based research, which involves schools and teachers in a range of ways, from research partners to membership of project advisory boards. The aims within each area of activity are also linked, centring on supporting schools as research-rich environments for student teachers and teacher colleagues while also enabling conversations across these activities, which can guide the educational relevance of departmental research at the university. In this article we focus on professional development and research activities.

One criterion for joining the Deanery is that schools name a teacher as a research champion. The champion joins with those from other schools who meet each other formally three times a year along with university staff, create their own informal network and attend, with school colleagues, a twice-yearly research exchange meeting organised by the Deanery. While the ITE partnership consists solely of secondary schools, some primary schools are involved because of their close links with secondary members. Hence, schools range in size and organisational complexity. In addition, the position of the champions within the schools varies from teachers with a few years' experience and no management responsibilities to members of senior leadership teams (SLTs) with significant strategic responsibility. The difference in positions suggests that schools vary in the importance they ascribe to the role and its potential for informing both school strategy and practice.

The Deanery, in summary, operates as a third space (Gutiérrez, 2008) where the expertise of all the stakeholders is discussed, respected and built on; it is a site of potential knowledge exchange. In our focus on research we share a concern with overcoming a potential gap between research and practice held, for example, by Farley-Ripple *et al.* (2018). Like this US team, we see the problem as bi-directional, placing demands on both the producers and users of research and their organisations. The Deanery as a third space was created to bridge the gap in ways that benefitted all participating organisations. In the new space, university pedagogic research is informed by on-the-ground anticipations of dilemmas arising from national policies or curriculum changes, and school strategies are informed by easy access to the latest research on, for example, assessment or inclusion.

In this way the Deanery emphasises the relational aspects of practitioner engagement with research and researchers (Earl and Timperley, 2009; Rickinson *et al.*, 2011). Like Penuel *et al.* (2015), it moves beyond notions of translating research evidence for the use of practitioners in order to acknowledge 'processes of collaboration and exchange that are both messier and potentially more transformative than the one-way translation of knowledge of research into practice' (Penuel *et al.*, 2015: 183). Like Penuel and his colleagues, we also draw on cultural/historical concepts to frame our analyses, but in this article we do not share their concern with boundary crossing.

Instead, our focus is the work of school-based teacher research champions in their schools.

The challenge for schools from these messy processes is to create evidence-informed strategies which enable transformative evidence-informed practice. While school systems are data-rich and SLTs are expert in using data to respond to schools' development needs, externally generated evidence that indicates the need for a fresh look at established practices is more difficult to incorporate into strategies. Schools are wise to consider carefully the relevance of research-based evidence: what 'worked there' may not 'work here' simply because the conditions, such as catchments, are different. As Cartwright and Hardie (2012) observe, sound evidence is an essential starting point, but the process by which evidence is incorporated into local practices is complex and the relevance of new knowledge for local priorities has a crucial part to play within it. In this article we focus on a new role that has emerged in the Deanery: school-based research champions. We argue (i) that this role offers considerable potential for connecting local understandings of school practices and priorities with relevant research-based knowledge and (ii) that in realising this potential, the role also challenges schools to consider how they systemically take advantage of the new knowledge being made available. Our aim in this article is therefore to demonstrate the potential of the role by identifying what current champions do and why they do it: their actions and intentions.

## **Literature review**

### *Research-engaged schools*

Interest in identifying the features of research-rich schools is not new. Handscomb and MacBeath (2003), for example, suggested that 'research-engaged' schools should be characterised not only by 'research-rich pedagogy' but also by an active 'research orientation' that meant staff were members of a 'research community'. These two dimensions—a commitment to learning from relevant research conducted elsewhere and direct engagement in ongoing research—are included in the list of characteristics that Godfrey (2016: 305) later used to distinguish research-engaged schools:

- Promoting practitioner research among their staff.
- Encouraging their staff to read and respond to published research.
- Welcoming (as a learning opportunity as well as a responsibility to the wider educational community) being the subject of research by outside organisations.
- Using research to inform their decision-making at every level.
- Having an outward-looking orientation (Wilkins, 2011), including research-based links with other schools and universities.

How these attributes are expressed highlights Godfrey's focus on the role of leadership in ensuring that schools become 'research-led organisations'. Dimmock (2019) too has focused on the role of school leaders in establishing a 'research-into-practice' mentality, along with the institutional procedures necessary to sustain such an approach. In using the term 'research-into-practice', Dimmock emphasises the importance of making, rather than simply talking about, improvements to practice

that are informed by compelling evidence. Teachers' professional development, according to Dimmock, should therefore include not only the skills necessary to 'seek, interpret and apply research', but also those required for effective evaluation.

In suggesting that 'research capacity' should become part of individual teachers' job descriptions, Dimmock's argument draws on Hargreaves' (2003) analysis of schools as organisations. According to Hargreaves, improving practices depends not just on 'intellectual capital' (the necessary knowledge, skills, values and dispositions) but also on 'social capital (trust and respect built around collegiality and collaboration) and on 'organisational capital': the use of leadership knowledge and skill to establish the kinds of structures and institutional processes that will support it. Thus, Dimmock (2019) concludes that key leadership considerations for research engagement also include: 'networked and collaborative links to universities, research institutions and other schools'; a 'whole-school approach to a methodology of data collection and analysis that promotes teacher collaboration'; and the establishment of 'formal roles that recognise the importance of a research-informed approach, such as a research coordinator' (p. 60).

#### *Networked relationships between schools and universities*

An obvious foundation on which schools in England might build relationships with universities is the partnerships that have been a mandated feature of most ITE programmes in England and Wales since the early 1990s (DfE, 1992, 1993). The ensuing requirement for more extensive school experience called for closer relationships between universities and schools and provided a framework within which genuinely collaborative, tightly integrated courses, such as the Oxford Internship Scheme (Benton, 1990; McIntyre, 1993; Hagger and McIntyre, 2006), could flourish (see Furlong *et al.*, 2000). The scope to build on such partnerships was later enhanced by the introduction of Master's level credits within postgraduate teacher education programmes, as a result of the Bologna process, bringing higher education programmes into alignment across Europe (Edwards and Ellis, 2012). This created an incentive for recently qualified teachers in England to continue their engagement with research through completion of a full Master's degree.

A further stimulus for joint engagement is the emphasis that the UK Research Excellence Framework, the assessment of university research quality, places on research impact or 'knowledge exchange'. The decline of local authorities, as their remit within education has been reduced through the Academies programmes and their funding cut by central government (Greany and Higham, 2018), has also left an important space that universities have the potential to fill—at the hub of complex local networks. The presence of a supportive but impartial 'research broker' may encourage schools to collaborate in the creation of a self-improving system of school-to-school support, which is not impeded by the simultaneous imperative for schools to compete with one another in a quasi-market system (Greany, 2015).

#### *Developing research-engaged partnerships*

There are several examples of how these different stimuli have combined to develop research-engaged partnerships. These include the Schools–University Partnership for

Educational Research (SUPER) at the University of Cambridge; the Research Learning Communities project developed with partnership schools by the Institute of Education (University College London, UCL); and the ‘Research leads Improving School Education’ (RISE) programme within the Research Schools Network.

In each initiative, members of school staff were appointed as research leads and, although the programmes differed, their common purpose was to support the development of research-engaged schools. Each partnership has been evaluated, with conclusions pointing to the importance of analysing school processes to understand how research engagement is enabled. In studying the Cambridge initiative, Cornelissen *et al.* (2017) examined processes in a single-case-study school and identified the vital role played both by *formal* structures (such as ‘enquiry groups’ involving all teachers and teaching assistants in relation to key aspects of the School Improvement Plan) and the *informal* encouragement provided by senior leaders—as well as the partnership role held by the teacher research lead. The evaluation of the UCL Research Learning Communities project (Rose *et al.*, 2017) found no evidence that the Communities improved pupil outcomes (measured by reading outcomes at Key Stage 2); but it did reveal a positive impact on teachers’ disposition towards research, albeit one mediated by factors such as the level of postgraduate qualifications or seniority of teachers who participated in the intervention. Finally, the evaluation of the RISE initiative (Wiggins *et al.*, 2019) concluded that involvement in the two-year programme did not have a significant positive impact on pupil attainment at GCSE, though they found that implementation was better when the research leads possessed attributes such as strong relationships with other colleagues in the school, particularly the school’s learning and teaching co-ordinator, and a secure grasp of the school’s attainment data. In brief, these evaluations indicate the potential importance of the role of research lead and how that role is incorporated by school leaders into schools as systems.

### *Seeing schools as systems*

While these evaluations usefully reveal features that may produce research engagement, they do not explain what goes on when research leads attempt to negotiate research-based knowledge into schools as systems. Consequently, what research champions do and why they do it is at the core of the study reported here. Schools are by definition what Tsoukas terms ‘knowledge systems’ (Tsoukas, 2005: 2). Recognising schools as knowledge-infused institutions allows us to take a systemic view of knowledge production and use, and examine ‘the social practices, forms of interactions, values, routines, power structures and the organisation of work – upon which individual knowledge and action draw...’ (Tsoukas, 2005: 3). Our focus is the research champions and how they navigate the historically accumulated social practices of their schools and try to negotiate relevant research-based knowledge into these practices.

We know that systems of practices are largely self-organising (Ulrich, 2012) and may reject artefacts, both material and ideal, that are inserted into the flow of actions and activities. Engeström’s insights into activity systems highlight the contradictions that arise when a system is challenged to change. Most relevant to the present study is

what he terms a tertiary contradiction, which occurs when ‘representatives of a culture’ (in our case research champions) ‘introduce the knowledge and priorities of a culturally more advanced form of the central activity’ into the central activity of a system (Engeström, 2015: 70).

His approach recognises the challenges to be faced when negotiating new knowledge into practices. For Engeström, human activity is a collective endeavour and always a contradictory unit, holding together the old and the new and containing different voices and interpretations, which create fresh ways of working that change the activity itself (Engeström, 2015). We might expect that schools, as activity systems concerned with knowledge, would relish new ideas. However, that would be to underestimate how much schools need stability and consequently frequently operate as tight rule-bound systems (Edwards *et al.*, 2017).

In the study reported here, we focus on the actions and strategic intentions of the research champions. Our framing is informed by cultural/historical analyses of actions and motives developed in and from the work of Hedegaard (Edwards *et al.*, 2019). The premise is that actions in activities are always motivated: oriented to what the actor recognises as the demands and possibilities for action within a practice. Eliciting both the actions and intentions of the research champions allows an analysis of their emergent role: what they can do and where the potential of the role remains underdeveloped.

## Design, method and analyses

The study therefore addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the strategic intentions of school-based research champions?
2. What actions in what activities do they carry out and with whom?

The questions are necessarily exploratory as the role was a new one, recently inserted into established school practices, and was being constructed by incumbents as they attempted to negotiate educational research into these practices.

Data were collected over 18 months (between November 2017 and May 2019) from nine research champions from a potential total of 16. The total number fluctuated as new schools joined the Deanery and there were changes in personnel as colleagues changed schools or roles within schools. Of the research champions who responded, eight were based in secondary schools and one in a primary school. The respondents occupied different roles, including head of a subject department, assistant headteacher of a secondary school, CPD coordinator in a primary school, professional tutor working within the ITE programme and teacher responsible for the support of newly qualified teachers.

Data were collected using a template (Figure 1) in which respondents were asked to think of an activity where they were doing some aspect of their work as research champion; to list all the actions involved in that activity; and to indicate how those actions connected with their strategic goals as research champions. This kind of template has been employed in several earlier studies with different groups of professionals (Daniels and Edwards, 2012; Edwards, 2015). It has its roots in cultural/historical psychology and its concern to capture motivated actions in activities within practices



Name:	Date:
Think of a setting in which you have taken some actions, however small, in your role as research champion. It may be a corridor conversation; a meeting with the SLT or with teachers who are doing research; or organising the access of a university researcher to the school etc. Please describe the setting.	
List all the actions you took as a research champion in that setting. Actions need to be quite precise, things that you did. They may include explaining the value of a teacher's project to the SLT; promising to email a useful paper; sharing a resource that was the outcome of a previous project; asking questions to elicit more details of a current project; listening with interest to a teacher describing their research etc.	
Please explain whether and how the actions you have just listed helped you to take forward your strategic aims as research champion.	

Figure 1. Research champion action template.

and, in doing so, reveal the motives that give shape to how activities are interpreted and enacted within the possibilities and demands to be found in institutional practices. A total of 59 templates were completed, with a mean number of seven per research champion.

The analysis was carried out jointly by all four authors, two of whom are research champions and two university-based academics who work within the Deanery. Brief summary interim analyses were twice presented to meetings of research champions, in order to gauge the face validity of the analytic approach, but the analysis presented here was undertaken at the end of the data collection processes and consisted of three stages.

Analysis of the data took place in three stages, essentially following the phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Stage 1 began with individual familiarisation with the data and generation of initial codes to identify the nature of the actions reported within activities and the intentions articulated in relation to each of them. Our individual suggestions were discussed and compared to agree a provisional list of codes, which we then sought to test systematically across the whole data set. In relation to actions, for example, we began with a list of six codes, each defined and exemplified: 'accessing research', 'engaging with research', 'deploying research', 'conducting own research', 'evaluating the use of research' and 'facilitating external research'. In stage 2 there was a division of labour with team members working

independently, each with half the data set (one pair focused on intentions and the other on actions) For example, two team members independently code all the actions within the templates in relation to the list above, noting any actions that did not fit these codes as well as considering how they might be grouped within broader themes. Reflection on specific actions that could not be adequately captured—such as discussing the intended outcomes of their own role with a senior member of staff—prompted additions and refinements to the initial codes and also informed identification of the categories in which they were all subsequently grouped. This iterative movement between the process of assigning codes, searching for and refining themes resulted in the identification of three broad categories of action: ‘developing their own knowledge and expertise in the role’; ‘working with colleagues to connect research to practice within the school community’; and ‘contributing to the wider community of research-engaged education’. Since the templates included a specific focus on who the champion was working with in any particular activity, codes were also developed to identify the focus of their intentions (ranging from the practice of ‘individual colleagues’ to that of ‘specific groups’ or the ‘whole school’), and to distinguish between actions that were ‘precisely targeted’ and those with a ‘broad reach’. In stage 3, one team member worked with the coded data sets to write a draft of the findings in relation to intentions and another member mirrored this activity with the analyses of activities and actions. Once these analyses were complete, the arguments taken forward and the data selected to support them were scrutinised by the whole team and the implications outlined in the discussion agreed.

## Findings

We start with the research champions’ strategic intentions when taking actions. These analyses are followed by a discussion of what the champions did and with whom, in order to give a sense of the possibilities for action they experienced as they attempted to negotiate relevant research-based knowledge into the practices of their schools.

### *Intentions*

The champions all presented two broad sets of intentions: creating a research culture in the school and supporting research-informed professional development. There were examples of efforts at influencing school policies and weaving research into previously agreed policies, but these actions were limited to a few individuals and did not feature strongly among the examples reported.

The aim in creating a research culture was described by one champion as achieving a shift to where ‘*asking “What does the research say about this?” becomes normal*’. There were two broad strands of activity in working on the research culture: (i) the mobilisation of relevant knowledge through blogs or newsletters, inviting in local researchers, collating existing research going on in the schools; and (ii) promoting collaboration among colleagues to discuss research, undertake joint enquiries, share ideas and take forward changes in practice.

The strategic aims for knowledge mobilisation across all the research champions were linked closely to concerns with the professional development of colleagues. They



included helping ‘staff become more research literate’, increasing ‘staff awareness of educational research that underpins high quality teaching and learning’ and ‘making staff aware of current projects helps to take forward the school’s engagement with current research’.

Being an outward-looking school could also be part of the rationale for knowledge mobilisation. Here we can see clearly how research knowledge could be categorised as one of Engeström’s disruptive tertiary artefacts. The next two comments are from champions who were members of SLTs and recognised the potential of research knowledge to challenge current practices:

*We are rather intuitive and like to feel more expert than we are and so getting the outside view—especially when it’s challenging—is one of our strategic objectives.*

*Our goal is that staff tap into external research ideas when thinking about teaching and developing as teachers. We wish to promote a culture of an outward-looking school apparent to visitors and applicants as well as current staff.*

Other champions reported some frustrations in relation to taking forward intentions, noting that a research newsletter was sometimes ‘read secretly’ as it is ‘not cool’ to be seen to read it and ‘there has been some resistance to involvement’. There was also the problem of having insufficient status within the school system. One champion, whose actions were largely limited to her own department, had managed to find an ally in the SLT to take some ideas forward, but was still ‘not involved further. I like to think my encouragement, prompting and ideas were influential; however, it was out of my hands’.

Promoting collaboration among colleagues by building smaller systems in which intentions could be enacted was one way of overcoming resistance at a school systems level. These smaller systems included a film club where teachers filmed themselves and shared the footage for discussion. The intention was that this way of working could then become assimilated into wider school practices:

*I would want to raise the profile of the [film groups] so that they are seen as a valuable use of time that teachers are keen to participate in, moving towards a point where the model [of mutual critical analysis] becomes self-perpetuating.*

Another similar example illustrates small beginnings with the potential to grow:

*To date, we have 8 members of the [research] group, including 2 interns [student teachers]. The next step is to ask those people to share the results of their research in the most user-friendly way possible.*

Sharing and making visible the expertise to be found within school practices permeated the intentions of the champions:

*I want to create a culture of sharing. I want teachers to understand what the rationale is behind the ideas that they are trying—so they understand them more deeply. If I can see that what they’re doing is based on really good research, I want to offer them the chance to find out a bit more about it—so that I can hook them into the research. I try really hard to create a culture in school where we share everything and where people are taking risks and reflecting.*

This comment allows us to link these efforts at building a culture of informed enquiry with the strengthening of teachers’ professional discretion and it takes us to

the second substantial focus of the participants' intentions: supporting research-informed professional development.

In analysing the champions' intentions in relation to professional development, we distinguished between their aims for changing practice across the whole school, their targeting of specific groups and their interactions with individual colleagues. Unsurprisingly, those who took a whole-school view held some senior leadership responsibilities and could declare, for example, that their intention was to *'implement evidence-based metacognitive strategies in all classrooms'* or *'promote continuity in practice from training to implementation, so that CPD is impactful and not just a "one hit wonder"'*. They sought to address common concerns as well as improving all students' experience:

*My aim is to help people use research in ways that makes their teaching effective—but here obviously I also wanted to help teachers find ways to tackle the things that worry them—people obsess about marking. With the work on revision I wanted teachers to be able to offer the best advice to their students so they didn't waste their time and efforts.*

These more senior champions were also better placed to target the professional development of specific groups: *'I would like the pastoral team to become more evidence-focused and research-engaged'* and *'Our early and foundation years achieved "Good" during our recent Ofsted [inspection]; the goal is to raise this to "Outstanding" during the next inspection'*.

Work with individuals involved the subtle *'nudging of participants to value their work more'* and *'make connections with others who research in school'*. It also included encouraging colleagues to take up opportunities for Master's work within the Deanery and helping people *'see how a research-based professional development programme can help them really deeply understand their teaching and learning and improve that aspect of their practice'*.

Where there was little opportunity for this broader view of professional learning, champions oriented themselves to informed reflection on teaching strategies and curriculum developments within their subject departments. Here the intention was summarised as *'putting words and knowledge into action'*. Intentions included better understandings and implementation of formative assessment, ways of approaching equations, spaced learning and target grades. Given that the Deanery criterion for school membership was the appointment of a research champion who could negotiate research-based knowledge into school practices, this emphasis on relatively narrow, within-department curriculum development was clearly restricted in focus, suggesting that the school had not recognised the potential offered by the role.

A similar discrepancy arising from power structures was obtained when we analysed how participants intended to inform or support school policies. Members of SLTs could share the following intentions: *'trying to ensure that school-improvement priorities are evidence-based'* or *'linking school improvement to research and encouraging leaders at all levels to contextualise their development plans in the light of research. Ensuring discussions around big developments in school are research-informed from the outset'*. However, those located elsewhere in school practices could not make similar links. Relationships with SLTs appeared to shape many of the intentions, varying from using research to give the SLT *'some uncomfortable listening'* (from a SLT-based champion) to the need to find ways of informing the SLT about the importance of research in

professional development and thereby the development of informed professional discretion.

### *Actions in activities*

We now turn to what participants did, in what kinds of activity and with whom. Their activities fell broadly into three categories: developing their own knowledge and expertise in the role; working with colleagues to connect research with practice within the school community; and contributing to the wider community of research-engaged education. Whilst the scale and reach of actions within these activities and the kinds of colleagues with whom research champions were interacting varied with their position within their organisation, these three broad activities were found across the settings.

Champions recognised the need to build their own expertise by engaging with research. Their templates reveal that considerable time was spent finding and reading research. Their sources included forums such as Twitter and Edublogs, and ResearchEd conferences, while they were also supported by the Deanery to access academic papers and seminars. Comments such as '[Named university person] *had sent out reading suggestions*' and '*I had learned about Harry Daniels' research on connectedness at an MSc seminar*' demonstrate how university links supported them in developing their expertise. In this activity their actions centred on becoming familiar with a wider pool of research than the material they shared with their colleagues and then selecting the most locally relevant studies. For example, one champion reported: '*I ... read some recommended blogs. A selection of these I reposted to our staff CPD feed*' and '*I used the EEF [Education Endowment Foundation] blog on their evidence reviews, downloaded some relevant reports and sent them to key individuals within the school*'. A list of actions from another champion indicates how they tailored publicly available evidence to the current needs of the school:

*After the INSET [CPD] ... I have been following up several leads that were talked about during the session. This includes work such as the levels of involvement by Dr Ferre Leavers, articles around improving the EYFS [Early Years Foundation Stage] environment, and the EYFS Framework.*

The expertise they were developing not only involved keeping up-to-date with research, but also being aware of the development needs of school colleagues and the potential relevance of pieces of current research to the changes in practice that colleagues were seeking to achieve. Their role therefore called for a critical analysis of material prior to sharing it, and careful consideration of who to share it with and how. Champions talked about reviewing a range of research papers and, for example, '*analysing and evaluating for LT [Leadership Team] (produced a paper) to establish whether we need to make small adjustments or new approaches*'.

As well as looking outwards to publicly available sources, they were also able to share and build research-based knowledge through their own research champion network and bring locally generated research into their schools. The Deanery played a crucial role in relation to this set of actions. Here one champion explains:

*This was the first meeting I had attended as research champion. I wanted to use it as an opportunity to meet with [name of research champion] with whom I had previously been in touch via email. . . I had emailed to pass on our approach in using IRIS technology, and had forwarded a copy of my dissertation for him to look at, as he'd requested. . . We discussed the benefits and pitfalls that I had found so far this year.*

Other connections with the university also gave access to locally generated and therefore highly relevant knowledge: one champion for example gathered 'all the research undertaken by all interns [PGCE students] in school, making it visible for colleagues'.

Several champions were or had been research-active through undertaking higher degrees. Others also saw engaging in small-scale research as important for their role, enabling them to sharpen their own critical analysis of the local relevance of research before sharing it. One champion reported: 'I was keen to share this with our team as it's very different to our traditional approach to seating plans, but wanted to trial it in my own classroom first, with a challenging Year 9 group', whilst another noted: 'I trialled this with my own GCSE mocks before Christmas and it worked well' and, on another occasion: 'I had trialled this already with classes so could vouch that the technology and the format would work'.

In brief, the research champions engaged in a wide range of activities designed to develop their own knowledge and expertise in this new role, often working alone as they read the research and sent it out, but also tapping into networks of research-engaged colleagues and other champions. They accessed and critically analysed research, and conducted small pilots in their own settings, evaluating the impact on their own teaching and students. These actions were not targeted at self-development for its own sake, but rather as a step towards their goal of creating a locally relevant research culture.

The second category of research activities comprised the actions where research evidence was negotiated into school practices through working with colleagues. Here the possibility for actions was noticeably influenced by factors outside the champion's control, in particular their position within the school and the openness of colleagues to research ideas. Yet all attempted to engage their colleagues with research in some way. There were two broad types of action: those with a wide reach and those targeted at specific individuals or groups.

Actions intended to achieve a wide reach included some of those already discussed in relation to the developing expertise of champions, such as regular research newsletters, CPD notice boards and reading recommendations. However, some champions could engage more directly with colleagues through being recognised as someone who could offer CPD to take forward strategic school development. For example, one was given responsibility for 'the whole-school Teaching and Learning Coaching Triads'. This involved actions such as: preparing 'documents to support and guide their discussions during these meetings, using my experience of writing questionnaires and preparing interview questions during the MSc'. Another used her role as a platform for taking understandings of metacognition across the school in staff workshops and also explaining the processes and importance of 'evidence-based teaching and learning' to students in a school assembly.

The more precisely targeted actions with individuals or groups also included discussions with colleagues who were undertaking Master's degrees, one-to-one meetings with heads of department about planned changes in practice, or apparently informal conversations with members of the SLT to keep them informed about the nature of the research champion role. This need to manage upwards was noted by some of the non-SLT respondents. Other targeted actions were with groups who were potential stakeholders in the development of research-informed practices. These included a presentation to a school's Board of Trustees and ongoing conversations to support changes in practices in a science department, for example, or with a pastoral team or an EYFS team. Some champions also chose to start with small groups of colleagues who were already interested in research. These included the film club already mentioned and small reading groups. Here a reading might be shared and discussed: *'We have termly informal meetings during the lunch break. These are not compulsory and. . . I share a research article in advance'*. Occasionally the initiative might come from a colleague. In one instance the mathematics department asked the champion whether there was *'any good research on humour in lessons and jokes in lessons'* leading to a *'really good discussion'* around the research that she went on to share with them.

In brief, actions targeted at a broad audience did not involve the direct negotiation of research knowledge into school practices and there was relatively little evidence of two-way interactions between champions and teacher colleagues. A few champions did note receiving a response, such as an email, to their newsletters or shared reading, but this was rare. However, the more precisely targeted actions were opportunities for negotiating the tertiary artefact of research evidence into practices, and led to more direct engagement with research evidence and the development of informed teacher discretion in their pedagogy.

In developing increased informed teacher discretion, champions supported colleagues as they took research ideas into action and encouraged them in action research. Again, the position of the champion within school practices was key. One participant focused on engaging her own department with research and, although highly successful there—*'I demonstrated this to the rest of the department, and we immediately adopted it'*—ultimately had limited reach across the school. One way of achieving wider reach for research was to support another colleague's research-based actions; for example, one champion supported a teacher who *'trialled whole-class feedback'* and then helped them share the findings in the wider school. Actions such as these illustrate how important it was that the facilitating function of the role was recognised by the school. If research cultures were to be developed, research-based thinking needed to be woven into the actions that comprised the wider practices of the school.

The final set of activities involved connecting with and contributing to the research community beyond the school. While we have already noted that champions assiduously assessed and shared research-based resources, this set of activities saw them both contributing to university-based research and encouraging and enabling colleagues to do so. It was less prevalent than the previous two sets of activities, but was an emergent area where the university had a part to play in more effectively encouraging schools' involvement in university-based research.

One sphere of beyond-school activity was the network of research champions together with university-based colleagues in the Deanery. Actions in activities in this



sphere included sharing ideas from both publicly available research and the smaller-scale studies taking place in schools. Here the twice-yearly research exchanges organised by the university usefully shared locally generated findings. Entering this sphere also opened up opportunities for champions to contribute to developments in other schools. For example, one champion delivered a ‘2-hour workshop with governors and senior staff’ of a different school to support their research culture.

This new positioning at the boundaries of the school and wider research communities also saw the gatekeeping functions of the role develop. Here the champions could guide university-based researchers to work with colleagues on funded pedagogic research. Similarly, they could connect colleagues with ongoing and recently completed university research, while helping researchers tailor their research summaries for schools: one reported attending a session run by two members of the university staff specifically to explore the ‘research areas that schools would be interested in academics at the university pursuing’ and discussed the presentation of research findings and the ‘utility of the research summary briefs [university staff name] has produced’. In these kinds of activity, the actions that champions reported included travelling to meetings, preparing presentations and keeping engaged with long-term university-based projects to support their own research goals. There were also signs of a developing facilitative approach in this gatekeeping role, with champions encouraging colleagues to undertake higher degrees or action research and steering them towards specific programmes:

*I advised him about the Enhanced Master’s in Learning and Teaching—which he’s doing now; giving him the details of the programme; explaining the bursaries for members of the Deanery. With the other teacher, I suggested she did the Action Research Fellows programme. I explained the programme to her. . . and I notified [university name] that she’s keen to join the programme next year.*

In summary, the actions of champions across a wide variety of activities exemplified a detailed tailoring of access to research that had the potential to ensure a good fit between the needs and strategies of their schools and the research both generated locally and available publicly. In line with the arguments put forward by Cartwright and Hardie (2012), that one needs to start with hard evidence but that an understanding of the context in which it will be incorporated is crucial, the role they were creating had the potential to be significant.

## Discussion

The motivated actions of the research champions, as they engaged in activities within school practices and created new connections between school and university practices in the Deanery, were aimed at building research-rich organisational cultures in their schools. This aspiration was grounded in the champions’ understandings of whole-school priorities if they were in positions where they could take such an overview. If their position in school practices provided a more restricted perspective, they worked within their department or faculty, or through their responsibility for staff development or supporting newly qualified teachers. In doing so they had the same aim, but also needed to build alliances with members of their SLT if their efforts were to have wider traction.



We hope therefore that our analysis of this emergent role gives some indication of its potential for supporting the kinds of needs analyses that are fundamental to schools' strategic planning. We have shown that research champions are not simply conduits for research knowledge in their blogs and newsletters; they select what is relevant and may also actively negotiate the knowledge that matters into local practices through their work with individuals and with groups. We earlier noted the challenge for systems presented by Cartwright and Hardie (2012): that knowing what works there doesn't mean that the same will work here. Instead, knowledge and expertise are needed to nuance connections between research findings and local practices. These attributes include local knowledge, research knowledge and the ability either to create a workable fit or to judge the research irrelevant for the local system. The champions were not advocating a simple 'what works' agenda; instead, though selecting and targeting what they shared, they were nuancing the research they came across to resonate with colleagues. In doing so they were able to nurture cultures where research findings could be treated sceptically and where teachers' professional discretion could be exercised if and when ideas were taken into practice.

We recognise the challenge that these processes may present to school leaders. If we return to Engeström (2015) and his view of human activity as a collective endeavour, which is always a contradictory unit holding together the old and the new, we can have every sympathy with senior leaders, who are holding together their schools within the high accountability regime that marks English education. Nonetheless, our analyses do suggest that there is considerable potential in the research champion role and that it is worth considering how that potential may be realised by giving careful consideration to its strategic positioning.

If this suggestion is taken up, the role of research champion would appear to benefit from being integrated into schools' leadership configurations. This claim resonates with the emphasis that both Godfrey (2016) and Dimmock (2019) place on the role of leadership in establishing research-engaged schools. Whilst Dimmock points to the need for formal roles such as that of research coordinator, our findings illustrate the importance of considering exactly how this role is related to existing structures and institutional processes if its potential is to be achieved. Farley-Ripple *et al.* (2018) observed how research use may involve 'organizational processes and or individual processes within schools as organisations' (p. 237). Our study suggests that more could be done to connect individual and organisational processes without stifling the nuancing that marked the work of the champions.

The question of the reach of research awareness and engagement was found in every set of templates. For those research champions who were close to or were members of SLTs, research could at times be disruptive, questioning complacencies and accepted practice as a starting point for strategy development, with both wide and deep reach. For the majority, however, wide reach was sought via blogs and newsletters; while deep reach, which resulted in changes in practice, was accomplished through modelling, facilitating the school-based research of others and encouraging action research. The facilitation activity marked an important step for those champions who were taking forward their research intentions as relatively isolated research heroes. Again, this points to the need to consider how the role of champion with rights and responsibilities is located in school systems.

From the university perspective, the initial intention had been that the Deanery would operate as a site of knowledge exchange, where the gains would be (i) easier transitions for PGCE students as they navigated the boundaries of the university department and research-rich school environments and (ii) pedagogic research that was informed by the concerns of practice and therefore of practical relevance. In the period since 2010, when the Deanery was first discussed with headteachers, the importance of research impact has increased, highlighting the value of the knowledge exchange features of the Deanery and the importance of the links between the champions and their university-based colleagues.

From the perspective of the champions, the connections with the university, with each other at research exchanges and with research from elsewhere have revealed the relevance of much educational research. Looking outwards, opening up the department or school to new ideas was a key concern. Importantly, champions all felt they benefitted from the ideas they encountered and the feedback they received on their contributions beyond the school. Here the network of champions was particularly affirming. Regardless of their status within their schools, they were all creating new roles and trying to insert them into school practices, while avoiding the dangers associated with introducing 'the knowledge and priorities of a culturally more advanced form of the central activity' (Engeström, 2015: 70) into the central activity of a system. In short, they were doing identity work within their schools and were helped by observing and supporting others doing the same.

As a small-scale qualitative study, the research has its limitations. A more rounded picture of the work of the research champions would have been achieved if we had interviewed at least one member of the SLT in each partnership school. Doing so would have enriched the accounts offered by the champions, and by hearing from senior colleagues of those champions who did *not* respond, we would have gained some sense of the barriers facing them. This gap in the data indicates where further research would be helpful. We know that school leaders and the systems in which they work are crucial to the development of professional learning communities in schools (Sheard and Sharples, 2016; Brown and Flood, 2020). However, research is still needed on how research champions as potential change agents might be incorporated into systems of distributed leadership in schools.

Nevertheless, through examining the strategic intentions, motivated actions and activities of this emerging role, we have pointed to its potential for informing strategic leadership, supporting professional development and developing school–university relations. As we analysed the data, we were excited by the enthusiasm and energy of the champions and were overwhelmed by the thoughtful inventiveness they employed in nurturing research-rich school environments and negotiating research-based knowledge into practice. Our intention has been to make all this visible so that this potentially valuable role can be recognised and, we suggest, integrated into school practices.

## Ethical guidelines

The research referred to in this article has been approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford and adheres to British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines.

## Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest associated with this article.

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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