

# *Research Alive*: A national initiative to support Teachers' engagement with research

## 1. Context and purpose

*The Meeting of the Waters* in Co. Wicklow, Ireland, marks the confluence of two rivers—the place where they come together to form the Avoca River. It's also famously where Thomas Moore penned his Irish melody of the same name which praises the combined strength of nature and of kinship at *The Meeting of the Waters*. Like parallel rivers, historically teachers and researchers have had their own, separate, culture, heritage and language. Thus some of the most important and interesting findings from research have eluded practise with “knowing about” and “implementing” research seen as different processes (Berliner, 2008, p.307). In Ireland the significance of research findings for teaching has received relatively little attention in the educational literature. While many studies claim to address issues of policy, far fewer directly address the concerns of practitioners. For example, in the literature review for the next phase of national longitudinal study, *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI, 2013), there is shortage of research on practical matters like the age at which young children can profitably begin school, the influences on school readiness, the home influences that predict how well children will do in their learning, and the influence of social-emotional factors on school achievement.

Inspired by the 2012 AERA conference theme, *Non satis scire/To know is not enough*, three national organisations in Ireland have been working together **to promote teachers' access to and engagement with research, and to support teachers as researchers themselves**. *Research Alive* is an initiative of the Centre for Effective Services (CES)<sup>1</sup>, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)<sup>2</sup> and The Teaching Council<sup>3</sup>. To date, a survey of teachers, a one-day seminar for teachers and researchers, and provision of online access to educational journals for all registered teachers are key actions of the initiative. The development of an online knowledge hub for teachers is a further action planned for 2014/2015.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.effectiveservices.org](http://www.effectiveservices.org) The CES connects research, policy and practice to improve outcomes for communities, children and young people across the island of Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) The NCCA advises the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment from early childhood to the end of second level. The NCCA engages with learners, teachers, practitioners, parents and others to support innovation in schools and other educational settings and undertakes, uses and shares research as a basis for advice and debate on education.

<sup>3</sup> [www.teachingcouncil.ie](http://www.teachingcouncil.ie) The Teaching Council is the regulator of the teaching profession and promotes professional standards in teaching. It acts in the interests of the public good while upholding and enhancing the reputation and status of the teaching profession.

## 2. Theoretical framework

As mentioned at the outset, teaching and research have evolved to some extent as parallel professions with their own culture, heritage and language. In one description of researchers as a “*knowledge elite*” their isolation as part of a “club” and the preservation of “social controls” within this club have been noted as part of their identity (Gaventa 1993). For teachers who may not be part of this club, the lack of (access to) theories of knowledge can be likened to an “epistemological fog” (Apple, 2014, p.xviii) which can cloud rather than illuminate practice.

However, much like the confluence of rivers, it has been argued that we become more *fully human* in the intersection of action and reflection (Freire, 1982). **Praxis** “*reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it*” (Freire, 1970, p. 145) offers one way to view the meeting place of teaching and research. This stands in marked contrast to other initiatives which position teachers only as implementers, with those who create or develop policy some distance away at the other end of the continuum. The field of **knowledge mobilisation** (KM) explores ways in which stronger connections can be made between research, policy and practice. Also relevant, particularly for the fourth action of the initiative—to develop an online knowledge hub for teachers—are the “**new politics of knowledge**” instituted by collaborative web-based technologies such as “the Blogosphere, Wikipedia, Digg, YouTube, and ... every website ... that invites all comers to offer their knowledge and their opinions, and to rate content, products, places, and people” (Sanger, 2007).

## 3. Modes of inquiry

**Teacher participation** has been key to the development of the Research Alive initiative. Because the beliefs, values and attributes that teachers mobilise in different contexts are key to determining the extent to which they can achieve agency (Priestly et al, 2012), the first data source—the Teacher Survey—focused not just on teachers’ access to and experience of research but also their understandings of the *value* of educational research to the teaching profession and to their own practise. Likewise, teachers’ participation in the one-day seminar (second data source), and their use of online education journals (third data source) have supported a type of *reflexive teacher agency* (Archer, 2000) whereby teachers shape the initiative as it develops rather than respond to externally initiated policy after the developmental process.

## 4. Data sources

The four actions of the initiative are also the key data sources—the teacher survey, one-day seminar, provision of access to online education journals and development of a knowledge hub for teachers.

### **(i) Teacher survey**

In 2012, a short survey was circulated to all teachers on the Teaching Council Register. The 16-question survey which used closed and open-ended questions, asked about teachers' **experience** with research, their views on the value of research vis-a-vis **practice** and ways to improve **access**. Over 4000 teachers responded. Primary (elementary) and post-primary (middle and high-school) teachers were equally represented with 44% of respondents from each sector.

### **(ii) One-day seminar**

In May 2013, the project partners hosted a one-day seminar for teachers, researchers and other stakeholders. Over 100 attended. Recorded workshop discussions focused on suggestions for teachers to have greater access to educational research and for researchers and policymakers to make research findings more accessible and to identify the types of research which make a difference in teaching and learning. Participants had an option to share their views on the value of educational research via a video-recording booth at the seminar and to share any further ideas on the seminar themes in their evaluation forms.

### **(iii) Online access to education journals**

Following teachers' calls for greater access to and engagement with educational research, the Teaching Council provided all registered teachers with free access to the EBSCO Education Source package in September 2013. This one-year pilot has now been extended for a second year. EBSCO is a collection of over 1700 journals, a selection of eBooks, and additional education research resources which includes education-related abstracts, conference papers and book reviews. Data includes information on usage by month and time of day, the types of items accessed and for how long, and users' age-range and education sector.

### **(iv) Development of an online knowledge hub for teachers**

Following access to the EBSCO Education Source Package, this action focuses on supporting teachers and other educational professionals to engage with research, with researchers and with one-another. Plans are underway to develop Mol Feasa which

means 'hub of wisdom/knowledge/learning'. This online hub will help users to understand **where** to find educational research; **how** to find what they need; and how to **evaluate** and **use** what they find. It will encourage the *translation* of research into useable formats so that teachers can apply the learning to their practice. In broad terms, the hub aims to enhance the work of teachers and researchers by offering them an online place for dialogue and engagement. Following the initial phase of development and publication, analytics will provide data on usage to inform ongoing development of the hub.

Figure 1. Engagements and connections which the hub should support for teachers



## 5. Findings to date

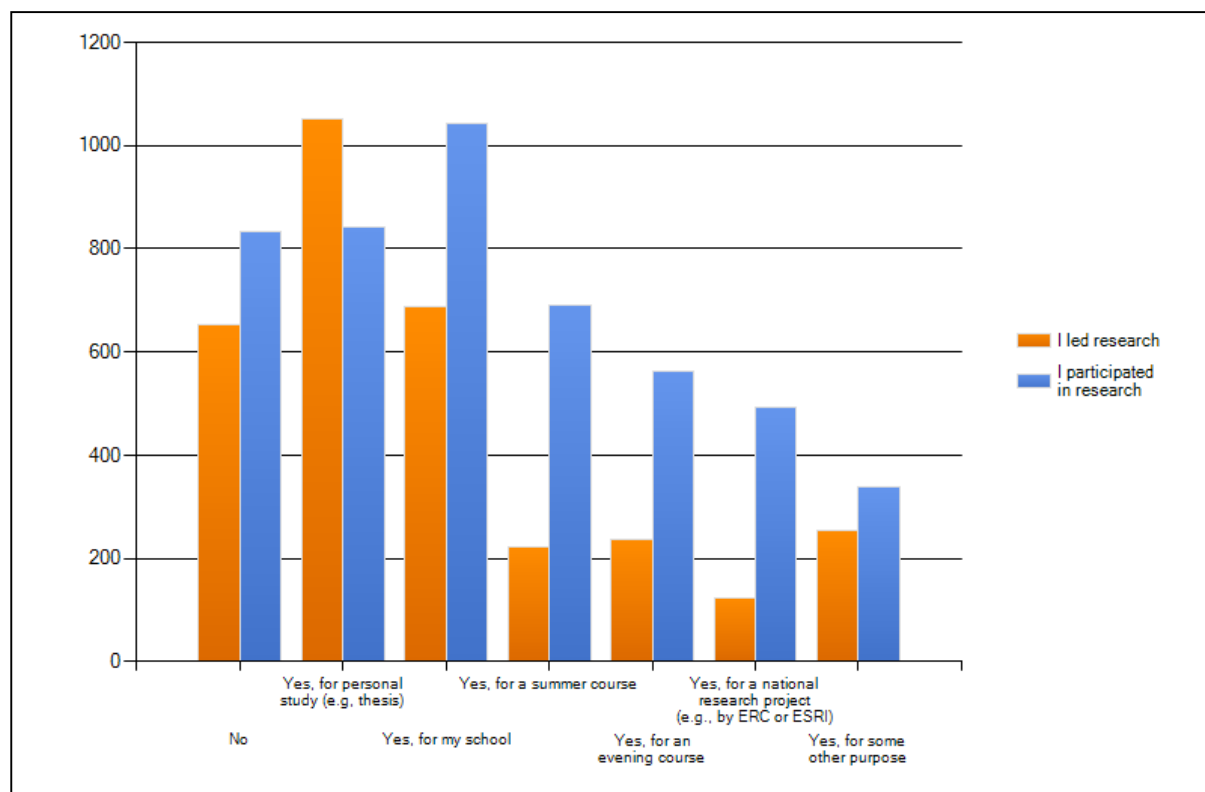
This section includes data from the Teacher Survey concerning teachers' experience of research, motivating factors to engage with research, and teachers' views on the contribution of educational research to different aspects of teaching.

### (i) Teachers' experience of research

The survey asked respondents if they had 'led and/or participated in research in the previous five years. Based on teacher report, approximately 16% of teachers had not led

research and 20% had not participated in research in these years. Research for personal study and school-based research were the two types most frequently reported (Table 1).

Table 1. Teachers who led or participated in research in the last 5 years

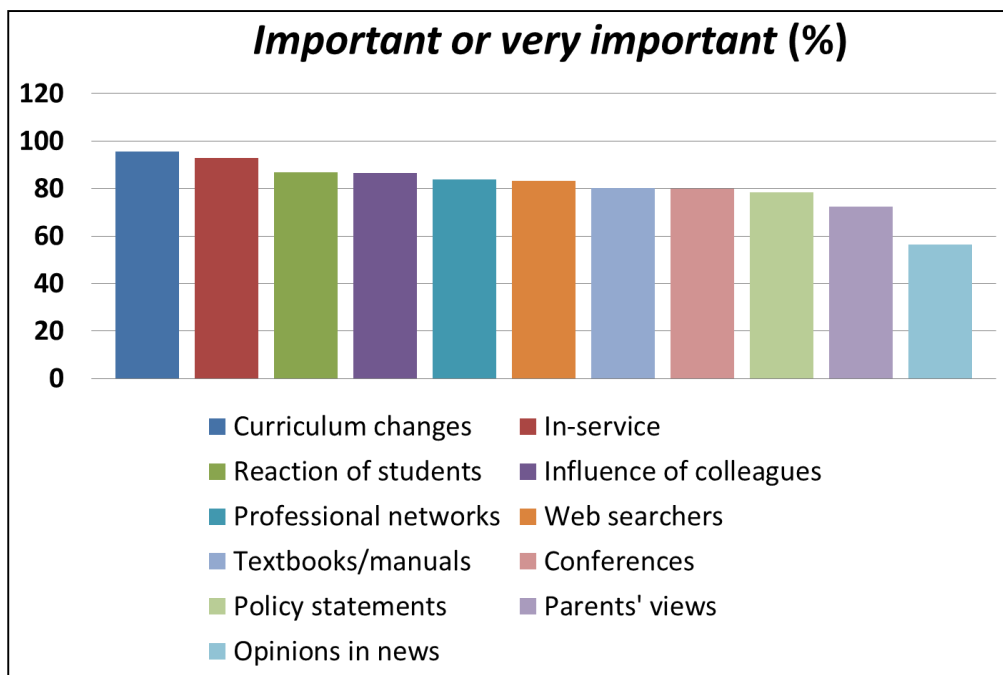


Experience of research for personal study included graduate studies for one-self/others such as a graduate diploma, masters or doctoral qualification. School-based research included support for national policy initiatives such as School-Self-Evaluation, development of educational resources for school use, and circulation of research papers for deliberation/discussion by colleagues.

## (ii) Motivating factors to engage with research

11 triggers or motivating factors (Table 2) were identified in the survey and respondents were asked how important they considered each for engaging with educational research. Factors which teachers considered 'important' or 'very important' are listed in order of priority in Table 2. Curriculum changes, students' learning needs/reactions, and professional networks were the greatest motivations to engage with educational research based on teachers' self-reports.

Table 2. Motivating factors to engage with research

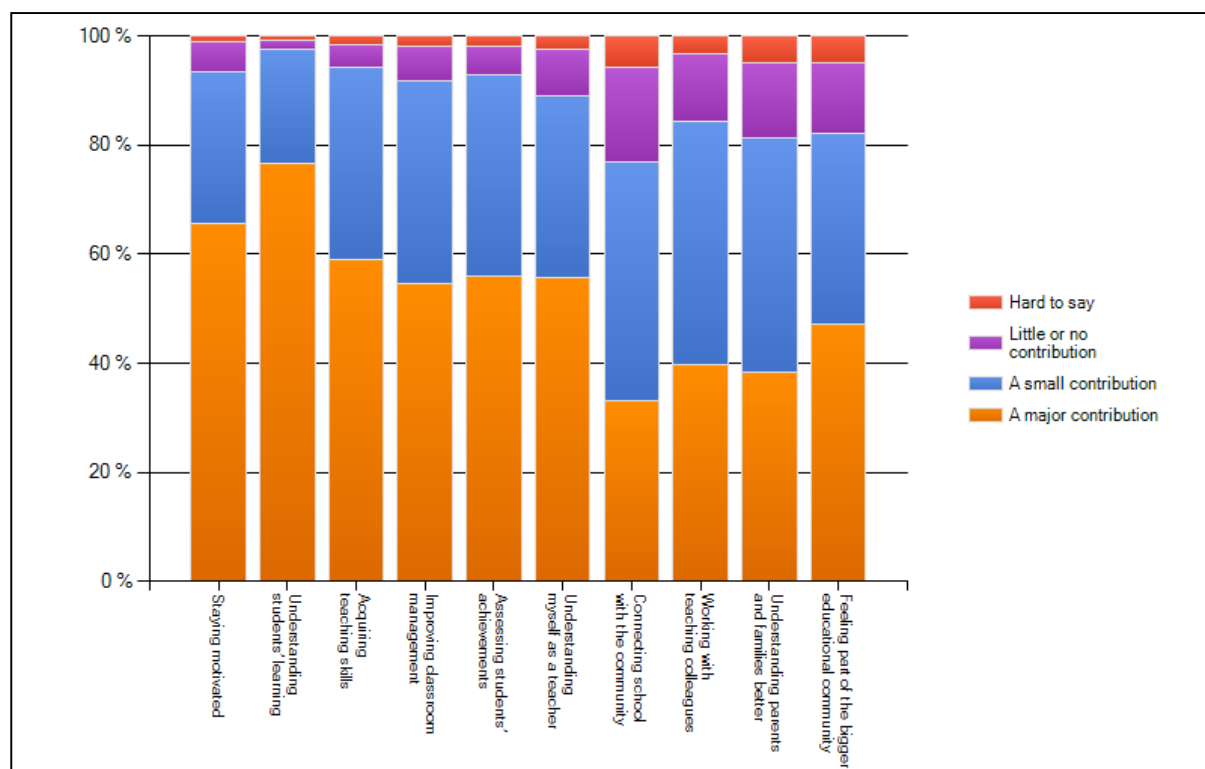


This question invited teachers to explain their choices. Two reasons were noted. The first focused on research as essential to the *profession* of teaching, “*Teachers need to keep in touch with the changes taking place in education, to keep our teaching current*”. The second focused on the value of research in shaping *practise*, “*Research should and must influence practise. We need to know what aspects of certain subjects have been researched and also what has not/needs to be researched*”.

### (iii) Contribution of research to practice

Ten benefits/positive outcomes of engaging with research (Table 3) were listed in another survey question and respondents were asked ‘to what extent do you think engaging with educational research can help you with each’. Understanding students’ learning, staying motivated, and acquiring teaching skills were the three most frequently reported benefits of engaging with educational research, based on data for those which make ‘a major contribution’. Within this category of ‘major contribution’, it is of note that the least popular benefits focused on teachers’ connections with colleagues, parents and the community outside the school.

Table 3. Contribution of research to practice



The question also invited teachers to identify other benefits. Responses noted the intrinsic value of research for the profession “*oftentimes, teachers don't get the bigger picture and this culture of isolationism is quite limiting to our profession; having time to read and reflect does have an enormous impact*” and for the practise of teaching, “*interaction with research informs practice. Research can help to conceptualise practice*”.

## 6. Significance of the work

The Research Alive initiative is located at the meeting place of teachers and researchers. It also brings together three national organisations responsible for curriculum and assessment development, regulation of the teaching profession and improved outcomes for young people and communities. The significance of findings for the work of partners is irrefutable—particularly in the areas of increased agency for teachers and education professionals, improved research design, and strategies for knowledge representation and dissemination. Looking ahead, the development of a national online knowledge hub for teachers is one key area of significance given the decision to make access to the hub freely available. Findings are also significant for the development of a National Framework for Continuing Professional Development which will begin later this year. The Framework is a key milestone in the development of teaching in Ireland in the context of professionally-led regulation, led by the Teaching Council.

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