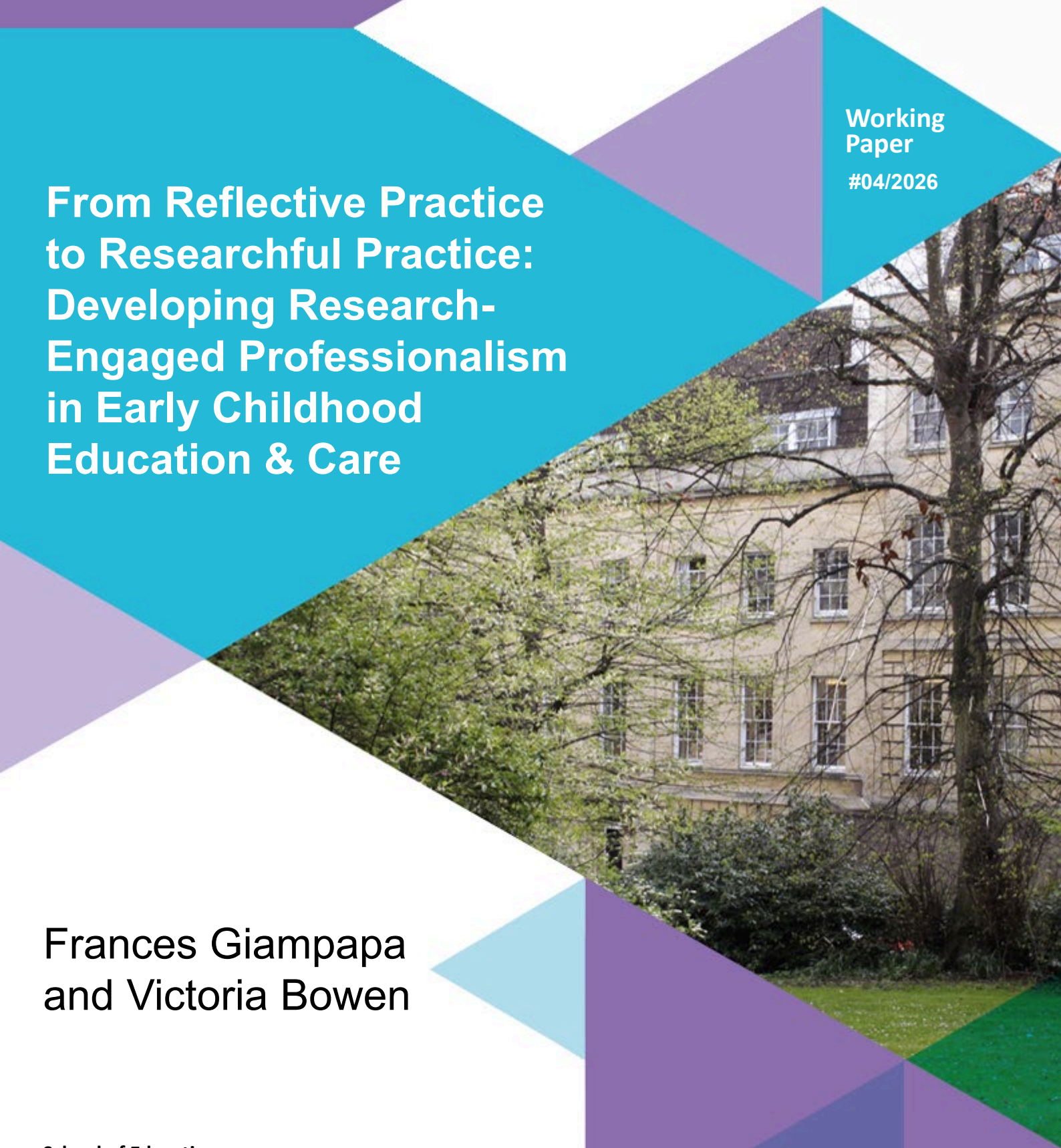
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From Reflective Practice to Researchful Practice: Developing Research-Engaged Professionalism in Early Childhood Education & Care



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See the Researchful Practice Toolkit at: https://researchfulpractice.bristol.ac.uk/

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Abstract

The early years workforce in England faces persistent challenges, including workforce instability, fragmented continuing professional development (CPD) and increasing expectations for evidence-informed practice. Although reflective practice is widely recognised as central to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), opportunities for educators to engage critically with research and generate professional knowledge through systematic inquiry remain limited. As a result, professional learning is often experienced as externally prescribed, episodic and disconnected from the realities of everyday practice.

This paper introduces Researchful Practice as a conceptual framework for research-engaged professionalism that extends reflective practice by integrating practitioner inquiry, research engagement and knowledge creation into everyday educational work. Rather than positioning educators as consumers of externally generated evidence, Researchful Practice conceptualises them as active producers of professional knowledge capable of informing pedagogical decision-making, organisational learning and educational improvement.

Drawing on a qualitative evaluation of the University of Bristol's Researchful Practice Toolkit across ten early years settings, the paper explores how educators experienced research engagement and how participation influenced professional identity, pedagogy, collaborative cultures and leadership. The findings suggest that Researchful Practice is best understood not simply as an approach to CPD, but as a framework for reconceptualising the relationship between research, practice and professional learning. By repositioning educators as partners in knowledge creation rather than recipients of CPD, the paper contributes to debates on research-engaged professionalism, workforce development and sustainable educational improvement within ECEC. In doing so, it advances Researchful Practice as a conceptual framework through which universities and educators can work collaboratively to generate contextually meaningful knowledge that supports both professional learning and organisational improvement.

1. Introduction

Across England, ECEC is expected to deliver increasingly ambitious outcomes for children despite persistent workforce instability (DfE, 2025; Flemmons & Worth, 2026; Bonetti, 2019). Educators are required to respond to expanding expectations relating to school readiness, inclusion, safeguarding, assessment, curriculum development and evidence-informed pedagogy; while simultaneously experiencing staffing shortages, limited professional recognition and constrained opportunities for CPD (Sakr & Bonetti, 2023).

These pressures have intensified policy interest in workforce development and professional learning. However, much CPD within the sector continues to rely on short-term training programmes designed to support the implementation of externally determined priorities (Sakr & Bonetti, 2023). While such approaches may increase educators' awareness of policy and research, they often provide limited opportunities for educators to investigate questions arising from their own settings, engage critically with research evidence or contribute to the generation of professional knowledge (Newman & Leggett, 2019; Nolan & Molla, 2018).

At the same time, there has been growing international recognition that sustainable educational improvement depends not simply on increasing access to research, but on developing educators' capacity to engage in inquiry, critically interpret evidence and participate in knowledge creation (Cordingley, 2015; Newman & Leggett, 2019). Professional learning is increasingly understood as a collaborative and socially situated process through which educators construct knowledge collectively while responding to the complexities of their own educational contexts (Nolan & Molla, 2018).

Although reflective practice remains central to ECEC - reflective practice, practitioner inquiry, research engagement and collaborative professional learning have largely developed as related but conceptually distinct traditions. Less attention has been given to how these might be brought together within a coherent model that connects individual professional learning with wider organisational development. In response, this paper proposes Researchful Practice as an integrative framework that positions educators not only as reflective practitioners, but as active participants in the generation, interpretation and application of professional knowledge.

This paper makes two contributions to the literature on professional learning in ECEC. First, it introduces Researchful Practice as a conceptual framework for research-engaged professionalism, bringing together reflective practice, practitioner inquiry, research engagement and collaborative professional learning. Second, drawing on a qualitative evaluation across ten early years settings, it demonstrates how this framework can be

enacted in practice. In doing so, the paper challenges linear models of knowledge transfer and extends understandings of evidence-informed practice by positioning educators as active producers, rather than passive consumers, of professional knowledge. It argues that Researchful Practice offers a distinctive model in which research and practice are mutually constitutive, strengthening professional agency, organisational learning and sustainable educational improvement.

2. Towards Researchful Practice: From Reflection to Research-Engaged Professionalism

While reflective practice has profoundly shaped understandings of professional learning in the early years (Reed & Canning, 2009), reflection alone may be insufficient to support research-engaged professionalism within increasingly complex educational contexts. Its primary focus is typically on educators' critical examination of their own experiences, actions and professional judgements. Although this can generate valuable insights and strengthen individual practice, it does not necessarily entail systematic engagement with research evidence, collaborative interpretation or the production of new professional knowledge. Without these additional dimensions, reflection can remain bounded by existing assumptions and established ways of understanding practice. Extending reflection through engagement with multiple forms of evidence, practitioner inquiry and knowledge creation therefore creates opportunities not only to interrogate practice more critically, but also to contribute to collective and organisational learning.

This conceptual separation is also evident across related traditions within the professional learning literature. Practitioner inquiry positions educators as active investigators of questions arising from their own settings, generating contextually grounded knowledge to inform and develop practice (Newman & Leggett, 2019). Research-engaged professionalism, by contrast, emphasises educators' capacity to engage critically with published research and mobilise evidence in professional decision-making, while collaborative professional learning foregrounds dialogue, shared inquiry and communities of practice as important mechanisms for professional growth and knowledge development (Nolan & Molla, 2018; Wenger, 1998). Each tradition therefore offers a valuable but partial account of research-engaged professional learning. Yet these perspectives have largely developed as related, but conceptually distinct traditions, with comparatively limited attention to how reflection, research engagement, practitioner inquiry and knowledge creation might operate together within a coherent model of professional practice.

This paper argues that these traditions are more productively understood not as discrete approaches to professional learning, but as interconnected dimensions of a broader

professional orientation. It therefore introduces Researchful Practice as a conceptual framework for research-engaged professionalism in which reflection, inquiry, engagement with evidence and knowledge creation are embedded within the everyday work of educators. Rather than displacing reflective practice, Researchful Practice extends it by positioning educators not only as reflective practitioners, but as active participants in the production, interpretation and mobilisation of professional knowledge. In this framing, professional learning becomes an ongoing process of inquiry and knowledge creation in which research and practice are mutually informing and constitutive dimensions of professional work.

Researchful Practice comprises four interconnected dimensions (see figure 1):

1. Reflective practice, through which educators critically examine pedagogical decisions, professional assumptions and children's experiences.
2. Practitioner inquiry, through which questions arising from practice are investigated systematically within educators' own professional contexts.
3. Research engagement, through which educators critically engage with, interpret and mobilise published and practitioner-generated evidence.
4. Collaborative professional learning, through which professional knowledge is interrogated, developed and shared through dialogue, collective inquiry and communities of practice.

These dimensions should not be understood as sequential stages or discrete activities. Rather, they are mutually reinforcing processes that together create the conditions for research-engaged professionalism. Reflection generates questions for inquiry; inquiry draws upon and contributes to research; research is interpreted collaboratively; and collaborative dialogue, in turn, informs further reflection. Through these relationships research becomes embedded within everyday educational practice rather than existing as an external body of knowledge awaiting implementation.

Figure 1: The four interconnected dimensions of Researchful Practice

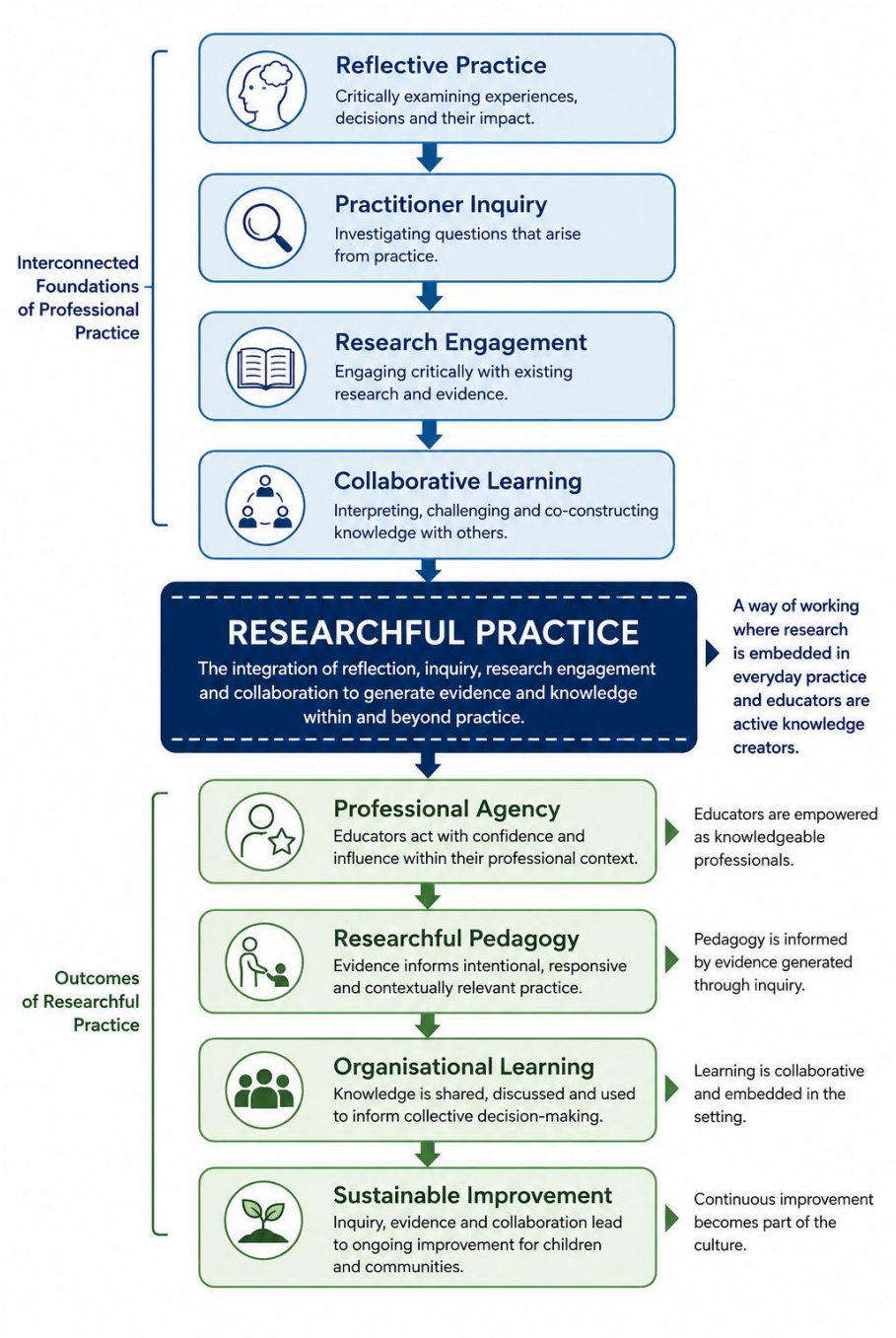


A central feature of this conceptualisation is a reconfiguration of professional identity. The traditional relationship between research and practice have often positioned educators primarily as users or consumers of externally generated research, with professional learning conceptualised in terms of accessing, interpreting and applying existing knowledge to practice (Cordingley, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). By contrast, practitioner inquiry and research-engaged approaches position educators as active participants in knowledge production, capable of generating, interrogating and mobilising knowledge within and across their own professional contexts (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2010; Godfrey & Brown, 2019).

The Researchful Practice Toolkit, developed at the University of Bristol, was designed to operationalise this conceptual framework within ECEC settings. Rather than functioning as a conventional programme of CPD, the Toolkit was intentionally designed to create the conditions through which educators could enact Researchful Practice within their everyday work. Participants engaged with six online units covering research paradigms, literature engagement, qualitative methods, ethics, data analysis and practitioner inquiry while simultaneously undertaking inquiries focused on questions emerging from their own settings.

Figure 2 synthesises these relationships within the conceptual framework underpinning this paper. At its centre is Researchful Practice as a professional orientation through which inquiry and engagement with knowledge become embedded within everyday educational work. The framework proposes that this orientation can strengthen professional agency, *researchful* pedagogy and organisational learning, creating conditions for sustainable educational improvement. Importantly, these relationships are recursive rather than linear: changes in professional practice and organisational learning can themselves generate new questions, further inquiry and renewed engagement with research.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Researchful Practice



3. Evaluating Researchful Practice

This paper draws on a qualitative evaluation of the Researchful Practice Toolkit, implemented across ten early years settings in England through two successive cohorts: the first in the Bristol area and the second in Lancashire. The evaluation sought to explore how educators experienced engagement with the Toolkit, how practitioner inquiry shaped their professional thinking and practice, and how research engagement became integrated within wider professional and organisational cultures. Consistent with the conceptualisation of Researchful Practice developed above, the evaluation focused on understanding processes of professional learning and change rather than measuring the effectiveness of the Toolkit against predetermined outcome indicators.

Participants were recruited from the early years settings taking part in the Researchful Practice programme and included early years educators, reception teachers, nursery leaders and quality managers. The inclusion of participants across two geographical cohorts and a range of professional roles provided opportunities to explore how Researchful Practice was understood and enacted within different professional and organisational contexts. Alongside engagement with the six Toolkit units, participants undertook practitioner inquiries addressing questions arising from their own settings.

Qualitative data were generated throughout the programme through multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews, practitioner inquiry reports, evaluation forms and professional dialogue sessions. Drawing across these sources enabled participants' accounts to be considered alongside the inquiries they produced, providing multiple perspectives on how Researchful Practice was understood, enacted and developed over time.

The study adopted a qualitative evaluative design focused on participants' experiences of engaging with the Researchful Practice Toolkit. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Analysis involved an iterative process of familiarisation, coding and interpretative theme development, through which patterns of shared meaning were constructed across the dataset while remaining attentive to differences between participants, professional roles and settings. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were understood as interpretative constructions developed through the researchers' active engagement with the data rather than as categories that simply emerged from participants' accounts.

Analysis identified a broad developmental pattern in how participants described their engagement with Researchful Practice. Rather than producing a set of discrete thematic

categories, participants' accounts suggested a series of interconnected shifts, beginning with changing perceptions of research and extending through changes in pedagogy, professional dialogue, leadership and organisational practice. These are presented below as five developmental shifts to illuminate the broad trajectory identified across the dataset. They should not, however, be understood as fixed or sequential developmental stages: participants moved between and revisited these processes in different ways according to their professional roles, settings and prior experiences.

Ethical approval for the evaluation was granted by the University of Bristol, and all participants provided informed consent to participate. Beyond these formal requirements, the evaluation was underpinned by an ongoing process of ethical dialogue, grounded in the values and principles embedded within the project and informed by the practice of structured ethical reflection (Brydon-Miller, Rector-Aranda & Stevens, 2015). This encouraged ethical considerations to be revisited throughout the research process, recognising ethics as situated, relational and responsive to the contexts in which practitioner inquiry took place. All data were anonymised in the reporting of findings to protect the identities of individual practitioners and settings.

Developmental Shift One: Becoming Research-Engaged

The first developmental shift concerned educators' changing perceptions of research. Many participants described entering the project viewing research as academic, inaccessible and largely disconnected from the realities of ECEC practice. Research was frequently associated with universities, formal qualifications or large-scale studies rather than everyday professional decision-making. Engagement with the Researchful Practice Toolkit challenged these assumptions. Participants consistently described the structured nature of the programme as making research more accessible and manageable. As one reception teacher explained:

"The Toolkit gave me a structure to what a research project should look like… it really flowed well—this is where I'm starting, this is what I need to do next."

Similarly, another participant reflected:

"You always think of research as these really big things… what it's helped me realise is I can use it for anything within my setting."

Rather than simply increasing knowledge about research methods, this shift appeared to strengthen educators' confidence in engaging critically with evidence and positioned inquiry as both achievable and professionally valuable. This represented not only a change in participants' understanding of research, but also an emerging shift in professional identity:

research was increasingly understood as something educators themselves could engage with, undertake and use to generate knowledge about their own practice.

Developmental Shift Two: Becoming Researchful

As educators became more confident engaging with research, they began describing changes in how they approached pedagogy itself. Rather than treating inquiry as a discrete project, participants increasingly integrated research into everyday observation, planning and decision-making. Several educators described becoming more intentional in how they observed children and interpreted evidence. One participant reflected:

"You just see things that you don't see in regular time… your eyes are much more open."

Another commented:

"It opens your eyes to why people are doing things and how they're doing them."

Importantly, educators also described broadening their understanding of what constituted evidence. Rather than relying primarily on assessment data, they increasingly valued observation, dialogue, children's perspectives and contextual interpretation. Significantly, practices such as observation were not necessarily new; rather, educators began to use familiar professional practices more intentionally through a *researchful* lens. Observation shifted from being primarily an everyday pedagogical or assessment activity to becoming a systematic means of generating evidence to investigate questions arising within their own settings. In this way, existing professional knowledge and practices took on new meaning as they were connected more explicitly to research evidence and mobilised as methods of practitioner inquiry. As one quality manager explained:

"Before, I thought research was all numbers and percentages… but actually the observations became the most important part."

What distinguished this shift from reflection alone was the increasingly systematic relationship participants established between observation, evidence, inquiry and pedagogical decision-making. Rather than reflecting primarily on experience, educators described drawing on multiple forms of evidence to investigate questions arising from practice, interrogate their interpretations and inform subsequent pedagogical decisions. Researchful Practice was therefore evident not simply in greater reflection, but in the integration of systematic inquiry and research-informed judgement within the everyday processes of observing, interpreting and responding to children's learning.

Developmental Shift Three: Creating Researchful Cultures

The influence of Researchful Practice extended beyond individual educators. Participants consistently described how inquiry stimulated richer professional dialogue and fostered increasingly collaborative approaches to educational improvement. Rather than discussing practice primarily through anecdote or personal opinion, educators reported engaging colleagues in conversations grounded in evidence emerging from their inquiries. As one participant observed:

"The quality of the discussions has definitely improved."

Another reflected on the value of collaborative inquiry:

"Having those forums and open discussions was really, really useful… it makes you realise that you are all in it together."

Participants described colleagues becoming increasingly interested in research, with inquiry findings frequently extending beyond the original project to influence wider discussions about pedagogy, curriculum and children's learning. Research therefore became a shared organisational resource rather than the responsibility of individual educators.

Developmental Shift Four: Leading Through Inquiry

As inquiry became increasingly incorporated into professional dialogue, many participants described growing confidence in influencing colleagues and contributing to organisational development. Rather than seeing themselves simply as implementers of established practice, educators increasingly positioned themselves as contributors to professional learning and educational improvement. Inquiry findings informed curriculum planning, professional development and wider discussions about pedagogy. Participants described mentoring colleagues, leading professional discussions and advocating for wider engagement with practitioner inquiry across their settings. As one participant explained:

"Everything I do is going to be research-based."

These findings suggest that engagement in the Researchful Practice Toolkit created opportunities for distributed forms of leadership

Developmental Shift Five: Embedding Researchful Practice

A final developmental shift concerned the extent to which inquiry continued beyond participants' initial projects and became incorporated into wider pedagogical and organisational practice. Participants described revisiting, refining and extending their inquiries with new cohorts of children, while approaches developed through individual

projects were in some cases adopted more widely within their settings. As one participant explained:

"The project that we started, we've just continued that because it was so successful and it's just part of our practice now."

These accounts suggest a shift from inquiry as a time-limited professional development activity towards inquiry as an increasingly embedded feature of pedagogical and organisational practice. Importantly, participants were not simply continuing individual projects; they described revisiting questions, refining approaches and extending inquiry into new areas of practice. Sustainability, in this sense, was characterised less by the continuation of particular projects than by an emerging disposition towards questioning, evidence and improvement. While longer-term research would be required to establish whether these changes were sustained over time, participants' accounts indicate the potential for Researchful Practice to contribute to the development of enduring research-engaged cultures.

Taken together, these five developmental shifts reveal a broadening of Researchful Practice across individual, pedagogical and organisational domains. Initial changes concerned educators' relationships with research and their confidence in engaging with inquiry. These shifts subsequently became visible in pedagogical decision-making, professional dialogue and the interpretation of evidence, before extending into professional leadership and organisational learning. The findings therefore suggest that becoming *researchful* involved more than acquiring research skills: it entailed a changing relationship with professional knowledge, in which educators increasingly understood themselves as capable of generating, interrogating and mobilising evidence individually and collectively. While this trajectory was neither uniform nor linear, it illustrates how the interconnected dimensions of Researchful Practice identified in the conceptual framework became enacted within participants' professional contexts.

4. Discussion: Researchful Practice as Research-Engaged Professionalism

The principal contribution of this study lies not simply in evaluating the Researchful Practice Toolkit as a professional development resource, but in articulating and empirically illustrating Researchful Practice as a model of research-engaged professionalism. While the Toolkit provided a mechanism through which educators could engage with research and practitioner inquiry, its wider significance lies in how this engagement appeared to reshape educators' relationships with research, knowledge and professional practice. As illustrated in Figure 1, Researchful Practice brings together reflective practice, practitioner inquiry, research engagement and collaborative professional learning as interconnected and

mutually reinforcing processes through which research becomes embedded within everyday professional work. The findings illustrate how these processes were associated with shifts in professional agency, *researchful* pedagogy and organisational learning (Stoll *et al*., 2006; Cordingley, 2015), as educators moved from viewing research as largely external to practice towards engaging with inquiry as an integral dimension of professional decision-making and identity. Rather than representing a fixed or linear pathway, Researchful Practice is therefore understood as an ongoing professional orientation in which educators engage with, generate and collaboratively interpret knowledge to inform and improve practice.

Researchful Practice as Research-Engaged Professionalism

At the outset of the programme, many participants positioned research as something undertaken by universities or external experts rather than by educators themselves. Research was consequently perceived as relatively distant from everyday practice, reflecting a familiar distinction between those who produce knowledge and those expected to apply it. Engagement with the Toolkit appeared to disrupt this distinction. As one participant reflected:

“You always think of research as these really big things… what it's helped me realise is I can use it for anything within my setting.”

This shift represents more than increased confidence in undertaking research; it suggests a reconceptualisation of professional expertise and educators’ relationship with knowledge. Rather than positioning themselves primarily as consumers of externally generated evidence, participants increasingly recognised their capacity to investigate questions arising from practice and generate contextually meaningful professional knowledge through systematic inquiry. At the same time, the development of research knowledge and skills appeared to strengthen educators’ capacity to engage more critically and discerningly with external research, enabling them to question its relevance, quality and applicability to their own contexts rather than simply accepting or implementing findings. Growing confidence in research engagement was therefore accompanied by greater confidence in professional judgement, suggesting that becoming research-engaged involved not only developing the capacity to produce and critically interpret knowledge, but also a changing sense of professional agency.

Importantly, this confidence should not be understood solely as an individual outcome of professional learning. Participants’ accounts suggest that increased confidence supported their capacity to question assumptions, interrogate evidence and articulate the reasoning underpinning pedagogical decisions. From this perspective, research engagement becomes part of how professional agency is exercised, rather than an additional activity undertaken alongside everyday practice. This aligns with understandings of teacher agency as an

achievement emerging through the interaction between professional capacities and the contexts in which educators work (Priestley *et al*., 2026), while suggesting that engagement in inquiry may provide one means through which such agency is developed and enacted.

These findings both support and extend established traditions of reflective practice and practitioner inquiry. Schön (1983, 1987) positioned reflection as fundamental to professional judgement, while practitioner inquiry has highlighted educators' capacity to investigate questions arising from their own professional contexts (Newman & Leggett, 2019). Researchful Practice brings these traditions into relationship with critical engagement with published research and collaborative professional learning (Cordingley, 2015; Stoll *et al.,* 2006), offering a broader conceptualisation of research-engaged professionalism. Its distinctive contribution lies not simply in encouraging educators to use research or undertake inquiry, but in positioning them as active participants in the production, interpretation and mobilisation of professional knowledge.

This challenges more linear interpretations of evidence-informed practice in which knowledge is produced externally and subsequently transferred into educational settings for implementation (Godfrey & Brown, 2019). Such models risk maintaining a separation between research production and professional practice, positioning educators predominantly as recipients or users of evidence. Researchful Practice instead proposes a more reciprocal relationship between research and practice, in which educators engage critically with existing evidence, while also generating and refining professional knowledge through inquiry situated within everyday practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Professional expertise, from this perspective, resides not only in the capacity to apply research appropriately, but also in the capacity to question, generate, interpret and mobilise knowledge in response to the situated complexities of educational practice.

From Individual Inquiry to Organisational Learning

While the reconfiguration of professional identity represents an important finding, participants' accounts suggest that Researchful Practice also extended beyond individual educators into collective and organisational practice. As educators became more confident, engaging with inquiry, research and evidence became increasingly incorporated into professional dialogue and organisational decision-making. Participants described a shift from conversations grounded primarily in experience and professional opinion towards more systematic engagement with evidence generated through inquiry, informing discussions about curriculum development, pedagogy and collective problem-solving (Stoll et al., 2006). Accounts from participants suggest the emergence of collaborative cultures in which inquiry became increasingly understood as a shared professional endeavour rather than an

individual activity. Professional learning consequently extended beyond individual reflection towards the collective interpretation, interrogation and generation of professional knowledge. This resonates with Wenger's (1998) conception of communities of practice, in which knowledge develops through participation, dialogue and shared meaning-making.

Researchful Practice extends this perspective by foregrounding the role of systematic inquiry and evidence within these collaborative processes. Professional dialogue becomes not only a means of sharing existing knowledge and experience, but also a space in which evidence is collectively questioned, interpreted and mobilised to inform practice.

The relationships represented in Figures 1 and 2 were also reflected in participants' accounts of professional agency and leadership. As inquiry became increasingly integrated into professional dialogue, participants described greater confidence in contributing to pedagogical discussions, influencing colleagues and using evidence to inform decision-making within their settings. Leadership was therefore not confined to formal management responsibilities; it was also exercised through educators' capacity to generate, interpret and mobilise professional knowledge through inquiry. These findings point towards a distributed form of research-engaged leadership in which professional agency, collaborative inquiry and knowledge creation contribute to organisational learning and create conditions for sustained improvement (Harris, 2008).

Rethinking Professional Learning in Early Childhood Education and Care

The findings suggest that Researchful Practice represents more than an alternative approach to CPD. Transmissive forms of CPD, typically organised around courses, workshops or training events, can position professional learning primarily as the acquisition and application of knowledge generated elsewhere (Kennedy, 2014). While such approaches can provide valuable access to research and specialist expertise, they may offer fewer opportunities for educators to investigate questions arising from their own contexts, critically interrogate evidence or contribute to the generation of professional knowledge.

Researchful Practice offers a different orientation by embedding reflection, inquiry and engagement with evidence within educators' everyday professional work. Educators engage critically with published research while also generating evidence through systematic investigation of their own practice, interpreting knowledge collaboratively and using these insights to inform subsequent pedagogical decision-making. Professional learning is consequently understood not as a series of discrete events, but as an ongoing, contextually situated process through which professional knowledge is generated, tested and refined within practice (Wenger, 1998; Stoll *et al*., 2006).

Participants' accounts of continuing inquiry beyond their initial projects provide some evidence of how this orientation might become embedded over time. As one practitioner explained:

"The project that we started, we've just continued that because it was so successful and it's just part of our practice now."

This account is significant not simply because a particular project continued, but because it illustrates a changing relationship with professional learning: inquiry was increasingly experienced as part of everyday practice rather than as a time-limited CPD activity. Across the wider dataset, participants described revisiting questions, refining pedagogical approaches and incorporating inquiry into professional dialogue and curriculum development. These findings point towards the potential for Researchful Practice to become embedded within organisational routines and cultures, although longitudinal research would be required to establish the longer-term sustainability of these changes.

Researchful Practice therefore reframes professional learning from the acquisition and application of externally generated knowledge towards a more reciprocal process in which educators engage with, generate, interpret and mobilise professional knowledge within practice. In doing so, it offers a model of research-engaged professionalism that connects individual inquiry with collaborative knowledge creation and organisational learning, positioning educators and their settings as active participants in the production of knowledge for educational improvement.

5. Implications for Theory, Practice and Policy

The findings presented in this study suggest that the significance of Researchful Practice extends well beyond the evaluation of a single professional learning programme. Rather than representing an alternative model of CPD, Researchful Practice offers a conceptual framework for understanding how research engagement can reshape professional identity, pedagogical practice and organisational learning within ECEC. By integrating reflective practice, practitioner inquiry and research engagement, the framework positions educators not simply as users of research evidence but as active contributors to educational knowledge through systematic inquiry embedded within everyday practice.

The study has important theoretical implications for debates surrounding evidence-informed practice. Contemporary policy frequently conceptualises evidence as knowledge generated externally and subsequently implemented within educational settings. Researchful Practice challenges this assumption by proposing a reciprocal relationship between research and practice in which educators engage critically with published research while simultaneously

generating contextually situated knowledge through inquiry. Evidence-informed practice is therefore reframed as an ongoing process of knowledge co-creation rather than knowledge transfer, positioning research as an integral dimension of professional practice rather than an external resource to be implemented.

The findings also have significant implications for workforce development. Traditional approaches to CPD are often characterised by discrete training events that introduce externally determined priorities. By contrast, Researchful Practice embeds inquiry within educators' everyday work, enabling educators to investigate questions arising from their own settings, collaboratively interpret evidence and continually refine pedagogy. Such an approach has particular relevance within the ECEC workforce, where challenges relating to recruitment, retention and professional status remain persistent. Opportunities to engage in research may strengthen educators' confidence, professional agency and sense of professional identity while contributing to longer-term workforce sustainability.

Leadership emerged as a further implication of the framework. As educators became increasingly confident engaging with inquiry, they described assuming greater responsibility for leading professional dialogue, mentoring colleagues and influencing organisational decision-making. Leadership therefore became associated not simply with formal management roles but with educators' capacity to generate, interpret and mobilise evidence within their own settings. This highlights the potential of Researchful Practice to strengthen distributed leadership and develop collaborative cultures in which inquiry becomes a shared organisational endeavour.

The findings also suggest a different relationship between universities and practice. Rather than acting solely as producers and disseminators of research, universities become partners in collaborative knowledge creation, contributing methodological expertise, critical dialogue and access to research while recognising educators' contextual expertise and capacity for inquiry. Such partnerships move beyond traditional models of knowledge transfer towards more reciprocal forms of collaboration that acknowledge the complementary contributions of researchers and educators.

Taken together, these findings suggest that sustainable educational improvement depends not only on access to research evidence but on creating the organisational conditions in which inquiry becomes embedded within everyday professional practice. Protected time for inquiry, collaborative professional learning communities, supportive leadership and sustained university–practice partnerships appear central to developing research-engaged professionalism. In this sense, Researchful Practice offers a developmental model through

which professional learning, organisational learning and workforce development become mutually reinforcing processes.

6. Conclusion and Future Research

This study represents an initial empirical exploration of Researchful Practice as a conceptual framework for research-engaged professionalism within ECEC. Although the evaluation was conducted across ten early years settings within a single regional context and relied primarily on educator's perceptions rather than independent measures of child outcomes, it provides valuable insight into how educators experienced and enacted this approach. As a qualitative evaluation, the intention was not statistical generalisation but the development of a theoretically informed understanding of how Researchful Practice shapes professional identity, pedagogy and organisational learning.

The findings point towards several priorities for future research. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how research-engaged professional identities develop over time and whether they contribute to workforce retention, career progression and leadership. Further research should investigate relationships between Researchful Practice, pedagogical change and children's outcomes through mixed-method and longitudinal designs. There is also a need to explore the organisational conditions that enable inquiry cultures to become embedded and sustained, together with comparative research examining the applicability of the framework across different educational phases and international contexts. As digital professional learning continues to expand, future research should also consider how online and hybrid communities of inquiry can support the long-term development of research-engaged professional communities.

The principal contribution of this paper lies not in the evaluation of the Researchful Practice Toolkit itself, but in the articulation of Researchful Practice as a developmental model of research-engaged professionalism. By integrating reflective practice, practitioner inquiry, research engagement and collaborative learning, the framework repositions educators as active producers of professional knowledge capable of shaping pedagogical practice, organisational learning and educational improvement. Figure 1 captures this conceptual contribution by illustrating how these interconnected foundations generate professional agency, researchful pedagogy, collaborative research cultures, leadership through inquiry and sustainable organisational learning.

As education systems increasingly seek sustainable approaches to workforce development and evidence-informed improvement, Researchful Practice offers a different way of conceptualising the relationship between research and practice. Rather than positioning educators as reflective educators alone or as recipients of externally generated evidence, it

recognises them as research-engaged professionals whose inquiry continually generates, interprets and mobilises knowledge for the improvement of both practice and the profession itself.

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