

Researchful Practice in Early Years Settings

Dr. Frances Giampapa & Dr. Victoria Bowen, School of Education, University of Bristol

To improve outcomes for children, it is essential to develop and inspire the early years workforce with the best available evidence. The Researchful Practice Toolkit offers a scalable, accessible model of professional development that ensures educators are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to enhance practice. By supporting the implementation of research-engaged practice, we can foster a workforce that is not only motivated and highly skilled, but also able to make a lasting, positive impact on the educational experiences of young children.

About the research

Researchful practice in early years education and childcare (EYEC) involves educators actively engaging with research to inform and enhance quality in their settings. This approach goes beyond simply accessing research; it emphasises educators conducting their own research, evaluating its impact, and embedding findings into daily practice. This fosters a more informed, reflective and effective approach to EYEC.

The EYEC sector is experiencing record levels of workforce churn. However, embedding research-informed practice can strengthen job satisfaction, increase morale and elevate the professional status of early years educators.

Research-engaged practice enables early years educators to:

- Make decisions based on context-specific evidence.
- Critically assess national policy and research guidance.
- Collaborate with colleagues and communicate more effectively with parents, carers and external agencies.

However, access to quality Continuing Professional Development (CPD) remains limited due to time, funding constraints and the predominance of mandatory, compliance-based training ([Sakr and Bonetti, 2023](#)). A 2020 [Social Mobility Commission report](#) revealed that EYEC professionals are particularly underserved in CPD access. The situation is exacerbated for mid- and late-career professionals, for whom advanced training is often lacking.

Educators consistently report that they value CPD that is collaborative, reflective and directly relevant to their context. Coaching and practice-based models of CPD—those that emphasise inquiry, peer learning and application—have been found to significantly improve both educator confidence and child outcomes ([Rogers et al., 2023](#)).

The Researchful Practice Toolkit: A Solution for Enhancing Early Years Settings

At the University of Bristol, we have developed the Researchful Practice Toolkit, which equips early years educators with the tools to design and implement small-scale research projects within their own settings. The toolkit is an online, self-study course designed to help educators at all stages of their career engage with research, conduct their own studies, and incorporate findings into their everyday practice. Early years educators have shared positive feedback, citing how the toolkit guided them through the entire research process—from developing questions to analysing and evaluating their findings.

This approach not only empowers educators to answer questions pertinent to their own practice but also fosters collaboration and researchful dialogue among colleagues, stimulating improvements in practice. Educators who have used the toolkit report a transformation in their relationship with data, viewing it less as a daunting tool for external evaluation and more as a valuable resource for improving their teaching practices.

Through the Researchful Practice Toolkit, educators have been able to use data generated from their own research to make informed decisions about their practice. This empowerment has led to greater confidence in professional judgment and has bolstered educators' professional identities. In some cases, educators have assumed leadership roles and driven changes in teaching and learning quality.

Key findings

Below are our key findings from the project, with supporting quotes from early years educators who have used the toolkit.

Early Years Professionals Must Critically Engage with Research: Effective practice requires the ability to locate, interpret and evaluate research evidence that is relevant to specific EYEC contexts.

"The Toolkit has been beneficial, and I would recommend it to colleagues. The Toolkit and the Researchful Practice approach helps take a more focused approach to practice and research."

Educator-Led Research Enhances Contextual Understanding: Small-scale, teacher-led research projects allow early years educators to investigate real-world questions and challenges within their own settings, leading to more relevant and actionable insights.

"As a setting we have been using research to inform our practice for a number of years now, however taking part in the Researchful Practice training has enable me to use the research methods for the Toolkit in a more formal way to produce clear findings relevant to my setting."

Integrating Research into Daily Practice Strengthens Decision-Making: Using research findings to inform teaching strategies and classroom decisions improves responsiveness to children's needs and supports evidence-based improvements in practice.

"The school is already using EEF research to make important pedagogical decisions. The Researchful Practice Toolkit allowed me to look at these and personalise them to my setting."

A Research-Rich Culture Promotes Continuous Improvement: Establishing a setting where research is visible, valued and regularly applied cultivates an environment of inquiry and professional growth.

"The Researchful Practice project has shown me the value of research in refining and improving my practice. Moving forward, I will continue to use small-scale practitioner-led research inquiries. I will share my findings with colleagues/families and will stay updated with current educational research to ensure that my teaching remains evidence-based and responsive to children's evolving needs."

Research-Informed Practice Enhances Teaching and Learning Quality: Early years educators who base their decisions on research are better equipped to refine curricula, adapt instructional methods, and optimize the learning environment.

"Moving forward, due to the positive impact of the Researchful Practice Toolkit has had on our practice, we will continue to adopt this approach... The process enables us to be more focused, intentional and strategic in our planning and delivery of provision."

Engagement with Research Strengthens Professional Identity: Participating in research fosters confidence, autonomy and reflective thinking, contributing to deeper professional development among early years educators.

"The results of the Researchful Practice project have had a significant impact on my own practice. It has reinforced the value of imaginative, story rich approaches in supporting reluctant writers... Going forward, I plan to continue using classroom-based research to inform and develop my teaching practice. The project has demonstrated the power of reflective inquiry in driving meaningful change."



Policy Implications and Recommendations

The need for a well-trained, motivated early years workforce is reinforced by the Department for Education's (DfE) recent report (2025), which highlights the importance of evidence-based training and qualifications. To support a sustainable, skilled, and research-engaged early years workforce, we recommend the following actions:

1. Recognise and embed practice-based research as a valid and impactful form of CPD across national qualifications and training offers.
2. Incentivise settings to allocate time and resources for practitioner-led inquiry and provide ring-fenced funding for mid- and late-career early years educators to engage in high-quality CPD beyond mandatory training.
3. Encourage progression and leadership pathways through research engagement and promote models such as the Researchful Practice Toolkit that are scalable, accessible and evidence based.
4. Create local and national networks for Researchful Practice by developing regional hubs or partnerships to share practitioner-led research findings, foster peer learning, and build professional communities of practice.
5. Embed research-informed practice into inspection and quality assurance frameworks by encouraging Ofsted and local authorities to recognise research engagement as a marker of quality and innovation in early years provision.
6. Promote resources like the Researchful Practice Toolkit through national education portals and local authority networks to ensure that early years professionals at all levels are aware of and can access tools that promote professional growth.

Further information

Researchful Practice Toolkit: <https://researchfulpractice.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/>

Email: researchful-practicetoolkit@bristol.ac.uk

Contact the researchers

Dr Frances Giampapa

Associate Professor

Frances.Giampapa@bristol.ac.uk

Dr Victoria Bowen

Senior Research Associate

victoria.bowen.2018@bristol.ac.uk

