

Research Engaged School Award

Assessment Criteria

Sunfield School

Values, Leadership & Culture

1:1 Is research/enquiry at the heart of the organisation?

In 2005 Sunfield was proud to launch a Research Institute to celebrate and support the research activity of its practitioners. As a residential special school Sunfield understands the importance of exploring new and innovative ways of working with children with severe and complex learning needs and supports its practitioners in a variety of ways through their continuing professional development. Classroom based research projects have been conducted by teachers studying for their Bachelor of Arts in Education, Masters in Special and Inclusive Education and the Foundation Degree in Learning Support. Sunfield's Senior Leadership Team support members of staff in their learning activities both financially and practically. The Research & Development Officer has a rolling programme of research projects together with supporting staff to conduct their own research. All research outcomes are disseminated internally via an Innovations Forum and via internal research briefing sheets. Externally, practitioners are encouraged to write journal articles and attend conference presentations. The Sunfield website has dedicated space to enable the aims of its research to be shared: www.sunfield.org.uk/research_department.htm

1:2 Is the school culture supportive?

Through the Sunfield Research Institute there are a number of structures which support staff to undertake research and to be reflective practitioners. Sunfield has a budget to provide Research Scholarships to staff who are interested in exploring an area of their practice. The process is overseen by the Research & Development Officer and the Staff Development Co-ordinator who act as a point of contact providing ongoing mentoring support to the practitioner to develop their ideas and ensure the research is ethical, rigorous and viable. Sunfield's new prospectus is currently being developed and will include information about the Research Institute. Families already receive newsletters which keep them informed of the research activity and the proactive ways in which Sunfield aims to find new and improved ways of meeting their child's needs.

1:3 How does research contribute to learning?

Sunfield Research Institute is committed to making a difference to the lives of children with special needs. We have several projects which have had measurable impacts on curriculum, classroom practices and the learning environment:

- **Creating Living and Learning Environments for children with autism.** Through evidence based practice Sunfield has been able to work with architects to develop residential accommodation which is specifically tailored to the needs of children with autism. Principles from this design have been trialled through a PhD studentship jointly funded between The University of Worcester and Sunfield to support research to develop the new school build. Information regarding this work is available of the National Autistic Society website: www.nas.org.uk/content/1/c6/01/54/.../Feature%20Specific%20Report.pdf and has been published: Whitehurst, T (2006) 'The Impact of Building Design on Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders'. Good Autism Practice (May 2006)
- **Training and Development Agency for Schools R&D Award (SEN) 2: Developing a Model of Pedagogical Best Practice in the Use of Interactive Whiteboards for Children with Autism and Complex Learning Disabilities: Implications for Initial Teacher Training.** Sunfield was successful in securing TDA funding to explore ways of engaging children with autism through the use of whiteboard technology. This involved initial teacher training students working alongside our own classroom staff to investigate best practice.
- **Adapting Sherborne Developmental Movement for children with autism.** This project changed pedagogical practices in delivering Sherborne as part of the curriculum to enhance the opportunities for children with autism to develop social interaction and communication skills. These curriculum developments are offered as a course through our Professional Development Centre and supported by an instructional DVD.
- **Supporting Early Year's Practitioners working with children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.** A collaborative project with Worcestershire County Council investigated the needs of early year's practitioners to identify and address their learning needs around support for children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. A resource pack was developed which is free to download (www.sunfield.org.uk/publications.htm#fasd) and the research won the Nursery World Editors Choice award.

1:4 How do senior leaders demonstrate active support?

Senior Leaders at Sunfield are provided each month with a research update report which enables them to keep appraised of research activity, guide its development and ensure that it is prioritised at an organisational level. The annual Staff Awards evening acknowledges and celebrates the achievements of staff who have been involved in research projects throughout the year. Research Scholarships provide funding for supply cover which enables education staff to be released from their daily activities to pursue research. Outcomes from such research ensures that Sunfield utilises evidence based practice and embeds this knowledge within the organisation to improve delivery of its services.

1:5 How is commitment to research/enquiry evident in the school?

Research is shared both internally and externally. Internally, the Innovations Forum is held termly to enable people involved in research to share their findings with their colleagues. This also gives staff the opportunity to develop confidence in their presentation skills. Many staff have been successful in having their research published in journals: **Chatwin, I (2007) From Lecture to Classroom:**

The transfer of training to practice in an educational setting. PMLD Link

A display of research articles located in the main reception area of the building is available to visitors. In addition, a number of staff have written chapters giving details of their research which have been collated and published in: Barry Carpenter and Jo Egerton (2007) *New Horizons in Special Education*. Client : Sunfield

Research conducted at Sunfield is acknowledged on the websites of prominent organisations such as the National Autistic Society (www.nas.org.uk/nas/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=1562)

2: Support Systems

2:1 How is time made available?

Senior Leaders support staff to conduct research through the provision of the research scholarships facilitating both time and resources. Staff undertaking research are also invited to a research lunch where they have the opportunity to network and share ideas with other colleagues undertaking projects. All staff are encouraged to attend conferences in relation to their research either to gain more knowledge or to disseminate findings. The Staff Development Co-ordinator ensures staff are supported through CPD to access appropriate training and gain award bearing qualifications with the organisation financing 50% of the costs of external courses.

2:2 What access do you have to other resources from the school?

Sunfield has a Research & Development Officer who supports all research activity; a staff library with journal subscriptions to a range of professional literature; links with both the University of Worcester through delivery of the Foundation Degree in Learning Support onsite at Sunfield as a satellite centre and through the University of Birmingham where links have been established with the Centre for Neurodevelopmental Disorders. In addition we have a team of dedicated IT staff and an IT Training Officer who will support various aspects of research.

2:3 What mentoring support is available?

Mentoring for staff at Sunfield undertaking research is provided by the Research and Development Officer who has links with a number of external experts both in the field of education and research. The Research Institute benefits from an International Advisory Group comprising of experts in the field of special needs. These experts can be contacted via email to discuss aspects of project work. For example, Dr Phyllis Jones is associate Professor for the Department of

Special Educational Needs at the University of South Florida. Phyllis and I regularly have online discussions to support research activity at Sunfield. We have also conducted a collaborative research project with our host local authority, Worcestershire County Council, to raise knowledge of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders to ensure early years practitioners develop appropriate pedagogies for this group of young learners. Sunfield has supported a number of undergraduate students from local universities to conduct their research within special needs and has hosted a PhD studentship from the University of Worcester exploring learning environments for children with autism. Peer support for our own group of researchers is encouraged through the research lunches enabling practitioners to create their own networks of support.

2:4 What other ways do people gain access to research findings and expertise?

Sunfield has a library with journal subscriptions to a wide range of professional literature. This literature is contained within both peer reviewed journals and publications which are accessible and relevant to our diverse staff team. Our 'Making Research Do-able' course is made available to both internal and external staff through our Professional Development Centre Programme and provides research training with examples of how this has been undertaken by practitioners in a special school setting. Findings from research projects are also offered through the Professional Development Centre including a training day on Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, a workshop in the adapted pedagogical approach using Sherborne Developmental Movement with children with autism, and a range of families training based on our qualitative research with families of children with special needs. Staff regularly disseminate project findings at conferences; for example, the TDA recently hosted its dissemination event for its research awards and staff have previously presented findings at the National Teacher Research Panel event at the NEC in Birmingham (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp/lib/pdf/whitehurstandcockbill.pdf)

3 Research Activity

3:1 – what is the system for encouraging research engagement?

The Research Institute has clear aims and objectives and a planned programme of research activity. This includes supporting the research activities of individual practitioners in addition to applying for research funding to enable the recruitment of research assistants for larger projects. For example, BBC Children in Need funding a project entitled 'Voice for Choice' to enhance the choice making strategies of children with non-verbal communication skills. Progress and success of projects is overseen personally by the Research & Development Officer and more formally through the Research Institute's Research & Ethics Committee which meets termly. The Research & Development Officer works closely with the heads of all departments to ensure research outcomes are embedded in practice and that the findings are accessible to all practitioners through the Innovations Forum and Research Briefing Sheets. For example, research to consider the needs of families who are placing their child at a

residential school produced a series of outcomes which include the provision of enhanced compulsory training for all staff entitled 'What Families Tell Us' which has improved our service delivery, changes to the way we support families at the point of induction to include home visits and changes to our Families Charter to reflect mutual expectations.

3:2 – How do research areas reflect the interests of the organisation?

Research activities reflect the aims of the organisation as a whole but are specifically incorporated into our organisational strategy. For example, the Sunfield Strategic Aim for 2005-2010 states '*We aim to work as one organisation in responding to current and future needs and trends*' with Objective 9 for 2009-2010 stating '*We will research and develop approaches relevant to our children and young people and families needs*'. The creation of the Sunfield Research Institute marks the importance of research within the organisation and gives it specialist status. The importance of trialling and evaluating new approaches is acknowledged and embedded into the research programme; for example, Sunfield has recently changed its behaviour management approach from SCIP-UK (Strategies for Crisis Intervention & Prevention) to CALM (Crisis & Aggression Limitation Management) and plans to evaluate the impact of the change over once the programme has been in place for a period of one year.

3:3 - Main research activities in the last three years

(1) Building Bridges with Understanding: Foetal Alcohol Spectrum

Disorders Project. This project was funded by Worcestershire County Council Early Years Education Service which enabled Sunfield Research Institute to work with early years practitioners in 36 different early years settings to improve their knowledge of FASD and provide them with a toolkit of strategies to work with children affected. The project was selected for Nursery World Awards, Editors Choice, which is a discretionary award for an outstanding contribution to the field of early year's education, recognising both the importance of understanding the implications of drinking during pregnancy and the quality of the Resource Pack developed. A pack is available to download free of charge at www.sunfield.org.uk/publications.htm#fasd. Full details of the project can be found at www.sunfield.org.uk/pdf/FASD_Building_Bridges.pdf. The research has been published:

Whitehurst, T & Blackburn, C. (2009) 'Calling Time on FASD' *Special Children* (187) February/March, 25-27 and has a publication pending:

Blackburn, C & Whitehurst, T (2010) 'Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD); Facing the Challenge and shaping the future with SEN educational resources. *British Journal of Special Education*.

(2) Zippy's Friends. 'Zippy's Friends' 1 is a mainstream, primary, Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) resource, pioneered by the charity, Partnership for Children, that has been developed to teach six-and seven-year-

old children daily coping skills while promoting their mental health and emotional well-being. Although the programme content met Sunfield's current whole-school, curriculum plans for PSHE, it was not accessible to the majority of students in terms of format, medium and developmental level. A pilot action research study was carried out with four classes from a range of key stages using the first module ('Feelings') of Zippy's Friends. Following the successful pilot study, the whole school is now working with the programme, which is being adapted differently to reflect students' learning and age-related needs. This has enabled us to adapt the resource to support the emotional well-being of children with severe and complex learning needs. This work has been published:

Rowley, G & Cook, J. (2007) Zippy's Friends: Developing Curriculum Resources to Support the Mental Health Needs of Young People with Special Educational Needs in Barry Carpenter and Jo Egerton (Eds) *New Horizons in Special Education*. Clent : Sunfield Publications, 110-127

And further details can be found at:

www.sunfield.org.uk/pdf/Zippy%27s_Friends.pdf

(3) Developing a Model of Pedagogical Best Practice in the Use of Interactive Whiteboards for Children with Autism and Complex Learning Disabilities: Implications for Initial Teacher Training. This research was conducted with the benefit of an award from the Training & Development Agency for Schools (SEN) and aimed to identify strengths, weaknesses and best practice in the use of interactive whiteboards for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders and learning disabilities, and make recommendations for optimized practice and adaptations within existing pedagogical approaches. It involved Initial Teacher Training students in research and increase the facility and confidence of all teaching staff in using interactive whiteboards in the classroom with pupils with ASD. A one-day professional development training course has been established to disseminate findings and guidance. A full report can be found at: www.sunfield.org.uk/pdf/TDA_project.pdf and there is a publication pending:

Egerton, J., Cook, J & Whitehurst, T. (in press) 'Developing guidance for the use of interactive whiteboards for teachers of students with ASD and severe and complex learning disabilities'. *Journal of Assistive Technologies*

3.4 How is ethical practice ensured?

Sunfield Research Institute has a Research & Ethics Committee which meets termly to oversee, guide, approve and monitor all research undertaken within the organisation. This is supported by A code of Ethical Practice, A Research Policy and a Video & Photography Policy, all of which are periodically reviewed through strategic organisational mechanisms. Data is held in strict adherence to the Data Protection Act 1998 and all consents are obtained prior to commencement of any research project work.

3.5 How is quality of process and outcomes assured?

All research is scrutinized by the Research & Development Officer and the Research & Ethics Committee. The International Advisory Board includes professionals with extension experience in the field of educational research from a range of disciplines and international university institutions.

4. Impact

4.1 how does the organisation show its commitment to sharing results?

On completion of each research project a Research Briefing Sheet is made available to all staff to share findings. Copies of all publications are kept on a central database with hard copies available. Notification of publication and congratulations/acknowledgements are published in the weekly newsletter and recognition for involvement in research is demonstrated at the Annual Staff Awards Evening each November. The Innovations Forum enables staff to present findings to the organisation in the form of an internal presentation. Conference presentations and publications are actively encouraged and occur regularly both externally through national conference programmes and internally through Sunfield's Professional Development Centre, where research findings translate into course delivery to support professional development.

4.2 What opportunities are there for sharing results outside the school?

The Sunfield website has a dedicated area for sharing the content and findings of research projects: www.sunfield.org.uk/research_department.htm. Specific research projects/findings are also shared through other prominent organisational websites: www.nas.org.uk/nas/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=1562 and www.auctores.be/.../Teresa%20Whitehurst%20%20UDDA%2003102008.pdf (Evaluation of Autism Specific Living Environment) www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/education/.../steering_group.aspx (Strategies to support the education of children with visual impairment and autism). Publications and conference presentations are frequently made.

5. Sustainability

5.1 how many staff have been involved in research in the last three years?

There are 65 education staff, 40 of whom have been involved in research projects over the past 3 years.

5.2 Which members of your organization have been involved as researchers?

Teaching staff have been involved in a range of projects. Support staff such as those from catering, family services, Therapists, Assistant Psychologists and health team have also been involved in research. Both parents and siblings have been involved in a range of research aimed to improve services for families of children with severe and complex needs. Sunfield has Trustees rather than Governors and Trustees sit on the Research & Ethics Committee. Pupils have

been involved in actively shaping the findings of research; for example, children took digital photographs of things they liked in their new house to contribute to the evaluation of the autism specific living accommodation. Pupils also helped to shape resources to assist children without traditional verbal means of communication to make choices around therapies and medication.

5.3 How do you encourage people to become involved for the first time?

All new staff meet with the Research & Development Officer as part of their induction programme. They are advised of the Research Scholarship Scheme at that point and encouraged to explore any potential topic of enquiry with the Research & Development Officer. They are made aware that traditional routes of academic study are supported financially with Sunfield paying 50% of course fees and that study time is made available. Through our training budget we are able to support members of staff to attend appropriate training, conferences or seminars to support their research and in addition, internal staff are able to access all Sunfield's Professional Development Training Courses free of charge, to include the training 'Making Research Do-able'. The Research & Development Officer is available for 1:1 support and new staff can access peer support through the Research Lunch Programme.

5.4 How sustainable is your organisation's research engagement in the next three years?

The post of Research & Development Officer is core funded and research forms part of the organization's three year strategic plan. The Director of Appeals assists with fund raising to build capacity for dedicated research assistants to be employed (these posts can be applied for as secondment). Research is embedded in the school culture, open to all staff, on the agenda at strategic organizational meetings, forms part of the induction process for new starters and is actively promoted through our Senior Leadership Team.

5.5 How do you intend to build your school's research skills, capacity and impact in the next three years?

The Research & Ethics Committee monitor and assess the impact of research and the benefits to the organization on a regular basis, ensuring key findings are disseminated both internally and externally. The organisation's three year plan has recently been developed with research as a key component. Specific research projects are determined at strategic level and will currently be considering 1) the impact of research at Sunfield 2) An evaluation of Behaviour Management Strategies 3) The impact of life events on children with severe and complex learning needs. The Research Department's budgets enable funding to be identified to support Research Scholarships whilst training budgets are available to support staff pursuing academic routes and to access training to support their professional development.