

What does research mean to me? Exploring the relationships between teachers' signification and use of research

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Abstract

Purpose – This article explores the relationships between teachers' signification of research and their willingness to use it in professional practice.

Design/methodology/approach – This article adopts Baudrillard's (1968) semiotic theory of consumption to examine how teachers' perceptions of the desirability or value of research affect their use of it in their everyday practice. A sample of 608 teachers working in elementary, primary and secondary schools in five European countries – Catalonia, England, Poland, Slovenia and Romania – were surveyed regarding how their signification of research relates to their use of it in professional practice.

Findings – The findings show that teachers are more likely to use research when they signify it as relevant, useful, and as having a positive impact on their students, classroom practice and school – a pattern consistent with the existing literature. More surprisingly, years of teaching experience do not influence how teachers signify research; instead, factors such as alignment with school goals, leadership support and colleagues' engagement with research prove to be more decisive.

Research limitations/implications – The reliance on self-reported survey data for both signification and research engagement may introduce common method bias and social desirability effects, meaning teachers may overestimate their engagement with research. As a result, findings should be interpreted as reflecting perceived rather than actual practices. In addition, relatively small national sub-samples limit the generalisability of the results across and within the five countries. The cross-sectional design also prevents conclusions about causal relationships.

Practical implications – The findings inform school leaders in fostering research-engaged cultures through visible modelling and collective inquiry structures, guide researchers in ensuring practical classroom applicability and support teacher educators in embedding research engagement across career stages while balancing institutional priorities with teacher autonomy.

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Originality/value – This article adopts Baudrillard’s (1968) conceptualisation of signification to uncover the deeper, symbolic values teachers allocate to research use beyond its immediate utility in their day-to-day practice.

Keywords Significant of research, Use of research, Research-oriented teaching practices, Symbolic value of research

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Democratic societies depend on citizens being informed and critically engaged: able to understand, interrogate and debate the ideas that shape collective life (e.g. [Brown and Luzmore, 2021](#); [Pinker, 2018](#)). Yet contemporary public discourse is increasingly characterised by what has been described as a “post-truth” condition, in which complex claims are flattened into polarised positions and the authority of evidence is contested or selectively invoked ([D’Ancona, 2017](#)). Within such conditions, research is often positioned as a corrective: a means of supporting informed judgement, professional learning and reasoned debate across difference ([Brown et al., 2022a](#)).

In education, this expectation is particularly pronounced. Teachers are frequently cast as key mediators between research, practice and wider societal knowledge systems, with research-oriented professionalism framed as central to school improvement, student learning and the renewal of public trust in education ([UNESCO, 2021](#); [Crain-Dorough and Elder, 2021](#); [Mills et al., 2021](#)). Engagement with research is also seen as a way for teachers to model inquiry, promote critical thinking and cultivate learning communities oriented towards evidence and reflection ([Guilfoyle et al., 2020](#); [Schildkamp et al., 2024](#)).

However, despite this normative positioning, a persistent gap remains between the availability of educational research and its sustained use in teachers’ everyday professional practice (e.g. [Ahmed, 2015](#); [Kowalczyk-Wałędziak et al., 2020](#)). Existing studies have documented a wide range of structural, cultural and individual factors shaping research use, including access, time, leadership support and professional learning cultures ([Cain, 2015](#); [Van Schaik et al., 2018](#); [Malin et al., 2020](#)). Less attention, however, has been paid to the *meanings* teachers themselves attach to research, and how these meanings shape whether research is taken up, ignored or selectively mobilised within professional communities.

At this point, engagement with research appears to be a key variable for having informed teaching teams capable of integrating research into their professional practice ([Kowalczyk-Wałędziak and Ion, 2024](#); [Li and Xu, 2024](#)). Specifically, this engagement is largely determined by teachers’ perceptions of the meaning and relevance of research in their professional contexts ([Ion and Iucu, 2014](#); [Thom et al., 2021](#)). Therefore, to understand why teachers decide to engage with research evidence, it is essential to understand how they perceive the debate on evidence-based practice and to examine teachers’ conceptions of research and its contribution to their teaching practice.

This distinction matters. Research does not enter schools as neutral knowledge to be implemented or rejected solely on technical grounds. Rather, it circulates within professional cultures in which symbolic value, identity and social expectations shape what counts as legitimate, desirable or worth engaging with. Teachers may regard research as professionally affirming, externally imposed, reputationally valuable or largely irrelevant to the realities of classroom life. These forms of signification operate alongside – and sometimes independently from – assessments of research quality or practical utility.

To examine these dynamics, this study draws on [Baudrillard’s \(1968\)](#) semiotic theory of consumption, which conceptualises engagement with goods not only in terms of benefit and cost, but also in terms of signification: the symbolic meanings attached to acts of consumption. Applied to education, this lens positions research use – defined here as teachers’ self-reported willingness to use research evidence in professional practice – as a socially situated practice, shaped by professional identity, peer norms, leadership expectations and institutional priorities ([Brown et al., 2022b](#); [Ion et al., 2024](#)). From this perspective, teachers’ decision to engage with research depends not only on its perceived utility, but on what such engagement signals about

who they are as professionals and how their work is valued within their school community (Mausethagen *et al.*, 2025). Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to explore the relationships between teachers' perceived signification of research and their willingness to use it in professional practice. By focusing on teachers' symbolic interpretations of research – and how these relate to individual characteristics and school-level conditions – the study contributes to scholarship on professional capital and community by illuminating the cultural and relational dimensions through which research becomes embedded, or not, into everyday practice.

Specifically, this study responds to the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the relationships between teachers' perceived significant of research and their willingness to use it in professional practice?
- RQ2. How do individual teachers' characteristics (e.g. years of experience, gender and level of education completed) and school-level factors influence the relationships between their perceived significant of research and their willingness to use it in professional practice?

In doing so, the article seeks to advance understanding of why research use varies within and across professional communities, and how schools and systems might better support forms of professional learning in which research is not only available, but meaningfully valued and collectively enacted.

Factors affecting teachers' research use: insights from the literature

The existing literature demonstrates that the use of research in teachers' professional practice is complex and dependent on multiple, interrelated factors spanning individual, school and systemic levels.

In terms of how research might be implemented into practice by individual teachers, Century and Cassata (2016) encourage them to ask themselves the following fundamental questions: "What are we doing? Is it working? For whom? Where? When? How? And, Why?". Ming and Goldenberg (2021) offer a five-part framework individual professionals can employ as a means to decide whether or not a piece of research is worth bringing into their own practice: (1) "relevance of research question" to professional practice, (2) "theoretical credibility", (3) "methodological credibility", (4) "evidentiary credibility" and (5) "relevance of answers" in terms of prospective practical application. Furthermore, teachers' prior experience with research, their access to research training, their fluency in comprehending the language used by researchers, and their personal openness to innovation may also impact their willingness to use research in their practice (e.g. Gorard *et al.*, 2020; Ion and López, 2022).

School-level factors also play a critical role in whether or not a teacher will opt to use research in their professional practice, such as: their school's leadership style (particularly in terms of whether or not it supports professional learning); working conditions; school culture (especially in terms of openness to knowledge-sharing); and the presence or absence of collaborative practices among teaching staff (e.g. Cain, 2015; Van Schaik *et al.*, 2018).

Focussed more on the systems level, Malin *et al.* (2020) employ a cohesion/regulation matrix and institutional theory to understand research use in education systems across different countries, such as the United States and Germany. Their study reveals that highly regulated education systems, such as in the United States, often use research to meet policy mandates, emphasising accountability and compliance, which can limit teacher agency – including their agency regarding choosing to become research-engaged. This study also highlights that alignment between stakeholders and institutional support enhances research use, while fragmented governance and weak cohesion can be a hindrance.

Theoretical framework: Baudrillard's semiotic theory of consumption

The existing literature generally posits teachers' research use in the binary terms of the benefits and costs of them doing so (Ion *et al.*, 2024), therefore for this study, we opted for Baudrillard's

semiotic theory of consumption since it examines the roles of consumer goods beyond their most immediate, explicit or practical use, and extends to encompass their deeper psychological and social values and functions. Indeed, [Brown et al. \(2022b\)](#) have previously argued that the use of education in research can be understood as taking place within the framework of Western consumer culture, where teachers, i.e. “consumers”, evaluate research as a “good” for their potential consumption in line with three criteria, in Baudrillard’s terms: benefit, cost and signification. Baudrillard’s mapping of how consumers choose what to buy can help with conceptualising why teachers choose to use (or not use) research, more specifically, as a social process influenced by their perceptions of its benefits, costs and symbolic value.

To adopt Baudrillard’s typology, then, the “benefit” of using research refers to teachers’ perceptions of whether or not it will have a positive impact on, for instance, their students’ learning outcomes and their own professional decision-making and professional growth. The “cost” of using research refers to teachers’ perceptions of the mental, financial, time and energy expenditure required to incorporate research into their practice – often calculated by weighing them against the potential benefits. The “signification” of using research refers to the symbolic meaning/s that teachers see it to have, such as serving as a desirable and important or undesirable and unnecessary aspect of their professional identity and practice. Critically, this desirability is distinct from the perceived benefits of research use; instead, desirability refers to the extent to which teachers want to be associated with the act of research use. Such desirability may be attached to internal factors (e.g. professional identity) or external factors (e.g. colleagues’ expectations).

Study context

The data analysed in this article were collected from teachers in five European countries – Catalonia, England, Poland, [\[1\]](#) Slovenia and Romania—as part of the wider *Evidence-Informed Practice for School Inclusion* (EIPSI) project which aims to design and test innovative solutions for teachers and other education professionals working to improve student equity and inclusion through research-informed practices ([Brown et al., 2022b](#); [Ion et al., 2024](#)). These five contexts exemplify the wide range of challenges and policy initiatives pertaining to research use in education across Europe today.

In Catalonia, Spain, the enactment of the *Catalan Education Act* (Decret 274/2018) formalises a commitment to integrating research-informed practices into the education system by introducing research competences for teachers, complemented by non-governmental programmes from private organisations and university researchers that offer training and mentorship to support teachers in applying research insights in their classrooms ([González, 2023](#)). England has a well-established tradition of integrating evidence-informed practices into education, supported by targeted policies as well as various national and local initiatives aimed at fostering research use – such as the Chartered College of Teaching and the Education Endowment Foundation. Having gained their independence from the Soviet Union influence, Poland, Slovenia and Romania are still undergoing post-regime reforms to strengthen the role of research in their education systems. For instance, in 2022, Poland’s government implemented policies formally giving teachers the option to conduct and use educational research as a means of enhancing school quality – activities which now serve as a key criterion for teachers who want to reach higher professional statuses, such as certified teacher ([MEiN, 2022](#)). Reforms in Slovenia focus on modernising teacher education and professional development by promoting research competences, as well as partnerships between schools and research institutions, as means of enhancing the practical relevance of academic research ([Pecsek, 2023](#)). In Romania, efforts are underway to improve the quality of education through projects that support research-informed teaching practices, such as EU-funded programmes aimed at training educators in evidence-based methods and strengthening the role of research in school improvement plans ([Ion and Iucu, 2014](#)).

However, across all five countries, there remains a reluctance among teachers to fully embrace research-informed practice, despite the above-mentioned research cultures and policy efforts (e.g. [Brown et al., 2022a, b](#); [Ion et al., 2024](#); [Kowalczyk-Wałędzia et al., 2022](#);

Štemberger, 2020). While certain obstacles to research engagement – such as inaccessible research language, heavy workload and limited time – have been well documented in the studies cited above, far less is known about the symbolic meanings teachers attach to research and how these shape their desire to engage with it in practice. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the relationships teachers’ perceived signification of research and their willingness to use it in professional practice across five European countries.

Method

Data collection and instrument

A survey methodology was employed for the full research project, of which the present article is a part. The survey questionnaire featured items pertaining to the benefits, costs and signification the teachers perceived as being linked to their use of research in their professional practice (for further details on survey development see Brown *et al.*, 2022a, b; Ion *et al.*, 2024). The survey items exploring the benefits of research use ($N = 14$) aimed to capture teachers’ perceptions of the positive outcomes of using research, such as improving student learning, enhancing teaching practices or fostering professional growth (e.g. “I have found research evidence useful for guiding the development of new teaching practices”). The survey items exploring the costs of research use ($N = 12$) focused on perceived challenges or barriers, including the time, effort and resources required for integrating research into teaching practice (e.g. “It is difficult to know how to directly apply the findings of research evidence to my practice”). Finally, the survey items explore the signification of research ($N = 14$) focused on the symbolic meanings that teachers attach to research, such as its role in shaping their professional identity or its alignment with institutional expectations (e.g. “Teachers’ awareness, engagement and use of research evidence are developing rapidly”). In order to answer the research questions formulated for this study, this article uses data gathered exclusively via the 14 items pertaining to the teachers’ signification of research use.

Participants and sampling

The survey targeted a convenient sample of teachers working in elementary, primary and secondary schools across the countries involved in the EIPSI project: Catalonia ($N = 343$), England ($N = 79$), Slovenia ($N = 55$) and Romania ($N = 38$). Later, a researcher from Poland was invited to join the project due to her scholarship on evidence-informed practice at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in 2021, contributing an additional $N = 112$ teachers to the sample. This inclusion resulted in a total sample of $N = 627$, of which five responses were deemed invalid, leaving a final valid sample for the full survey of $N = 622$ participants and of $N = 608$ participants for the signification block.

The majority of these 608 participants identified as women (71.5%), while 25.3% identified as men and the remaining 3.3% did not declare their gender. The participants’ average age was 44.4 years, with 67% reporting 10+ years’ professional teaching experience. 40.9% of respondents held a Bachelor’s degree, 31.6% Master’s degrees, 19.6% postgraduate qualifications and 3.1% PhDs.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using descriptive statistics, correlations and factor analysis. For each item, participants were invited to respond along a Likert scale, where giving a score of 1 meant “completely disagree” and giving a score of 5 meant “completely agree”. The descriptive statistics included the calculation of the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD). Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to measure the strength and direction of associations between quantitative variables. Correlations with a Pearson coefficient value of ≥ 0.35 or ≤ -0.35 were considered to indicate a strong relationship. Additionally, factor analysis was applied to determine the underlying structure of the responses, identifying key dimensions that reflect how teachers attribute symbolic meaning to research use in their professional contexts.

Findings

In order to answer RQ1 (What are the relationships between teachers’ perceived signification of research and their willingness to use it in professional practice?), the descriptive statistics for the signification block items are given below (see Table 1).

Overall, the signification block data illustrates that teachers’ engagement with, and use of research evidence, is influenced by how they perceive its relevance and applicability to their school’s priorities and reputation, their own classroom practice and their broader professional context. As shown in Table 1, the item receiving the highest level of agreement from participants in the signification block is “I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned with meeting my school’s improvement priorities” ($M = 3.90$; $SD = 0.785$). Two further items yielded similarly high mean values: “Using research evidence enhances a school’s reputation and attractiveness as a place to work and learn” ($M = 3.88$; $SD = 0.866$) and “I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned with meeting the needs of my class” ($M = 3.86$; $SD = 0.937$).

The other items in the signification block yielded mean values of between 2.50 and 3.80, indicating a moderate level of agreement among participants. The level of participants’ agreement with the item “The use of research evidence is the hallmark of an effective profession” ($M = 3.76$; $SD = 0.902$) suggests that they perceive research engagement to be not only an optional or extra activity bringing tangential benefits to their profession, but rather a definitive, core characteristic signifying its optimal operation. Additionally, the teachers’ agreement with the statement “School leaders seek out research evidence to support their existing views or plans of action” ($M = 3.56$; $SD = 0.927$) suggests that school leaders often use research to reinforce their own pre-existing beliefs – perhaps as a signifier of credibility in order to lend more strength to their own strategies in the eyes of the people who they need to

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for signification block survey items

Item	N	Mean	SD
I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned to meeting my school’s improvement priorities	608	3.90	0.785
Using research evidence enhances a school’s reputation and attractiveness as a place to work and learn	607	3.88	0.866
I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned to meeting the needs of my class	606	3.86	0.937
The use of research evidence is the hallmark of an effective profession	607	3.76	0.902
School leaders seek out research evidence to support their existing views or plans of action	593	3.56	0.927
I am more likely to use research evidence if my colleagues are also using research evidence	605	3.54	0.96
There is an expectation in my school that we should engage with research evidence to improve practice	592	3.46	1.003
I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when this is a requirement of my performance management targets	606	3.42	1.025
I can think of few, if any, examples of successful uses of research evidence in education	596	3.32	1.023
School leaders’ awareness of, engagement in and use of research evidence are developing rapidly	592	3.29	0.902
The awareness of, engagement in and use of research evidence are developing rapidly amongst other key staff in schools	588	3.24	0.912
Teachers’ awareness of, engagement in and use of research evidence are developing rapidly	595	3.15	0.916
Schools rated “good” or above by Ofsted are more likely to use research-based interventions and/or have a research-friendly culture	594	3.04	1.135
Researchers are not expert authorities in relation to education	600	2.73	1.01

Source(s): Authors’ own work

implement them in practice (Ion and López, 2022). Lastly, the participants' agreement with the statement "I am more likely to use research evidence if my colleagues are also using research evidence" ($M = 3.54$; $SD = 0.96$) highlights the role of peer influence and collaborative culture in promoting the use of research evidence.

In order to respond to RQ2 (How do individual teachers' characteristics, e.g. years of experience, gender and level of education completed, and school-level factors influence the relationships between their perceived signification of research and their willingness to use it in professional practice?) and school-level factors influence their attitudes towards and use of research in their professional practice?), following our descriptive analysis, we carried out a correlation test to find correlations between the survey items, with the full results shown in Table 2.

The correlation test reveals several key findings regarding the use and signification of research evidence in teachers' professional practice. Critically, no significant correlation was found between the participants' years of teaching experience and any of the 14 items constituting the signification block. This lack of correlation may suggest that a high number of years of professional experience does not guarantee that a teacher will or can use research – a finding that perhaps problematises the perceived signification of research fluency by maturity of professional practice.

The following paragraphs examine the relationships between the items in the signification block. The statement "I can think of few, if any, examples of successful uses of research evidence in education (B7_1)" yields five positive, albeit low-intensity, correlations. A particularly interesting pattern emerges here: the more easily a teacher can bring to mind successful uses of research evidence in their profession, the more likely they are to agree that engaging with research enhances a school's reputation, in turn also signifying it as a more attractive workplace.

One item demonstrates significant correlation with all other items in the signification block: "Using research evidence enhances a school's reputation and attractiveness as a place to work and learn (B7_2)". Its strongest association is with "The use of research evidence is the hallmark of an effective profession (B7_3)", highlighting how those teachers who signify research integration as a marker of quality for their own school also signify it in the same way for the professional as a whole. Furthermore, B7_3's strong correlation with "School leaders seek out research evidence to support their existing views or plans of action (B7_5)" suggests that those teachers who see research as a signifier of a strong teaching profession are simultaneously aware of their school leaders' efforts in using research.

The item "Schools rated 'good' or above by [respective national education inspectorate] are more likely to use research-based interventions and/or have a research-friendly culture than other schools (B7_4)" yielded nine significant correlations. Although these correlations are moderate, with none exceeding a Pearson coefficient of 0.35, they suggest a tendency for high-ranking schools to be perceived by teachers as being more research-oriented. Among these correlations, there is a particularly notable link with "School leaders seek out research evidence to support their existing views or plans of action (B7_5)", suggesting that those teachers who posit research use as a signifier of high rankability simultaneously posit school leaders as the agents of that research use.

The item "I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned with meeting my school's improvement priorities (B7_6)" exhibits strong positive correlations with both "I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is a requirement of my performance management targets (B7_10)" and "I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned to meet the needs of my class (B7_12)".

In contrast, the item "Researchers are not expert authorities in relation to education (B7_7)" yielded relatively few and weak correlations, suggesting that this view is not central within teachers' broader attitudes towards using research. This lack of correlations may suggest that even where teachers might perceive researchers as a collective to be inexperienced regarding education issues, they separate this criticism from their own positive signification of research,

Table 2. ANOVA

Item (factor)		Experience	B7_1	B7_2	B7_3	B7_4	B7_5	B7_6	B7_7	B7_8	B7_9	B7_10	B7_11	B7_12	B7_13	B7_14
How many years' experience do you have in education overall? (EXPERIENCE)	Corr. Pearson Sig. (bilateral) N	1 599	0.027 581	0.003 592	0.076 592	-0.033 579	0.042 578	0.073 593	0.006 585	0.015 580	0.045 577	0.027 591	0.006 574	-0.057 591	0.037 577	-0.019 590
I can think of few, if any, examples of successful uses of research evidence in education (B7_1)	Corr. Pearson Sig. (bilateral) N	0.027 511	1 0	0.202** 593	0.076 594	-0.121** 582	-0.01 581	0.037 592	0.06 585	0.035 581	0.063 577	-0.002 588	0.087* 575	0.120** 588	0.123** 576	0.081 587
Using research evidence enhances a school's reputation and attractiveness as a place to work and learn (B7_2)	Corr. Pearson Sig. (bilateral) N	0.003 592	0.202** 593	1 607	0.591** 605	0.153** 589	0.300** 589	0.219** 603	-0.170** 595	0.249** 591	0.268** 589	0.129** 600	0.315** 584	0.136** 600	0.308** 587	0.171** 599
The use of research evidence is the hallmark of an effective profession (B7_3)	Corr. Pearson Sig. (bilateral) N	0.076 592	0.076 594	0.591** 605	1 607	0.244** 590	0.368** 589	0.206** 603	-0.201** 596	0.269** 592	0.216** 589	0.044 600	0.205** 585	0.135** 600	0.150** 587	0.147** 599
Schools rated "good" or above by Ofsted are more likely to use research-based interventions and/or have a research-friendly culture (B7_4)	Corr. Pearson Sig. (bilateral) N	-0.033 579	-0.121** 582	0.153** 589	0.244** 590	1 594	0.304** 581	0.162** 591	0.021 586	0.248** 583	0.228** 576	0.03 588	0.208** 575	0.065 586	0.161** 577	0.058 588
School leaders seek out research evidence to support their existing views or plans of action (B7_5)	Corr. Pearson Sig. (bilateral) N	0.042 578	-0.01 581	0.300** 589	0.368** 589	0.304** 581	1 593	0.284** 590	-0.175** 585	0.385** 580	0.439** 579	0.132** 586	0.424** 574	0.023 585	0.394** 578	0.155** 587
I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned with meeting my school's improvement priorities (B7_6)	Corr. Pearson Sig. (bilateral) N	0.073 593	0.037 592	0.219** 603	0.206** 603	0.162** 591	0.284** 590	1 608	0.009 596	0.223** 594	0.179** 590	0.357** 602	0.231** 586	0.378** 601	0.195** 589	0.331** 601
Researchers are not expert authorities in relation to education (B7_7)	Corr. Pearson Sig. (bilateral) N	0.006 585	0.06 585	-0.170** 595	-0.201** 596	0.021 586	-0.175** 585	0.009 596	1 600	-0.029 585	-0.035 582	-0.019 594	-0.117** 579	0.047 592	-0.03 582	0.034 592
Teachers' awareness, engagement and use of research evidence are developing rapidly. (B7_8)	Corr. Pearson Sig. (bilateral) N	0.015 580	0.035 581	0.249** 591	0.269** 592	0.248** 583	0.385** 580	0.223** 594	-0.029 585	1 595	0.711** 587	0.156** 590	0.607** 583	0.118** 589	0.335** 580	0.171** 589

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Item (factor)		Experience	B7_1	B7_2	B7_3	B7_4	B7_5	B7_6	B7_7	B7_8	B7_9	B7_10	B7_11	B7_12	B7_13	B7_14
School leaders' awareness, engagement and use of research evidence are developing rapidly. (B7_9)	Corr. Pearson	0.045	0.063	0.268**	0.216**	0.228**	0.439**	0.179**	−0.035	0.711**	1	0.111**	0.714**	−0.043	0.440**	0.096*
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.282	0.13	0	0	0	0	0	0.405	0		0.007	0	0.296	0	0.019
	N	577	577	589	589	576	579	590	582	587	592	588	581	587	578	588
I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when this is a requirement of my performance management targets (B7_10)	Corr. Pearson	0.027	−0.002	0.129**	0.044	0.03	0.132**	0.357**	−0.019	0.156**	0.111**	1	0.197**	0.358**	0.212**	0.402**
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.507	0.97	0.002	0.278	0.466	0.001	0	0.651	0	0.007		0	0	0	0
	N	591	588	600	600	588	586	602	594	590	588	606	584	601	588	602
The awareness, engagement and use of research evidence are developing rapidly amongst other key staff in schools (B7_11)	Corr. Pearson	0.006	0.087*	0.315**	0.205**	0.208**	0.424**	0.231**	−0.117**	0.607**	0.714**	0.197**	1	0.011	0.511**	0.185**
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.893	0.037	0	0	0	0	0	0.005	0	0	0		0.792	0	0
	N	574	575	584	585	575	574	586	579	583	581	584	588	583	575	584
I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned with meeting the needs of my class (B7_12)	Corr. Pearson	−0.057	0.120**	0.136**	0.135**	0.065	0.023	0.378**	0.047	0.118**	−0.043	0.358**	0.011	1	0.106**	0.352**
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.163	0.004	0.001	0.001	0.115	0.586	0	0.255	0.004	0.296	0	0.792		0.01	0
	N	591	588	600	600	586	585	601	592	589	587	601	583	606	587	601
There is an expectation in my school that we should engage with research evidence to improve practice (B7_13)	Corr. Pearson	0.037	0.123**	0.308**	0.150**	0.161**	0.394**	0.195**	−0.03	0.335**	0.440**	0.212**	0.511**	0.106**	1	0.235**
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.38	0.003	0	0	0	0	0	0.468	0	0	0	0	0.01		0
	N	577	576	587	587	577	578	589	582	580	578	588	575	587	592	589
I am more likely to use research evidence if my colleagues are also using research evidence (B7_14)	Corr. Pearson	−0.019	0.081	0.171**	0.147**	0.058	0.155**	0.331**	0.034	0.171**	0.096*	0.402**	0.185**	0.352**	0.235**	1
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.647	0.05	0	0	0.161	0	0	0.41	0	0.019	0	0	0	0	
	N	590	587	599	599	588	587	601	592	589	588	602	584	601	589	605

Note(s): ** The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

Source(s): Authors' own work

e.g. as useful and worth applying to their professional practice. By extension, unsurprisingly, those participants who agree with this item also tend to disagree that using research evidence is a hallmark of an effective teaching profession (B7_3).

The item “Teachers’ awareness, engagement and use of research evidence are developing rapidly (B7_8)” exhibits significant correlations with 11 other items, the three most intense being with: “School leaders’ awareness, engagement, and use of research evidence are developing rapidly (B7_9)”, “The awareness, engagement, and use of research evidence are developing rapidly amongst other key staff in schools (B7_11)” and “There is an expectation in my school that we should engage with research evidence to improve practice (B7_13)”. Finally, the item “I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is a requirement of my performance management targets (B7_10)” not only correlates strongly with “I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned with meeting my school’s improvement priorities (B7_6)”, as mentioned above, but also shows positive relationships with “I am more inclined to engage with research evidence when it is aligned with meeting the needs of my class (B7_12)” and “I am more likely to use research evidence if my colleagues are also using research evidence (B7_14)”. This correlation between the four items demonstrates that where teachers are motivated by one external influence, they are simultaneously open to other external influences, suggesting that they signify research as an extension of the priorities and needs of the classrooms and schools they serve.

Discussion

This study examined teachers’ signification of research and their willingness to use it in professional practice. Its findings challenge some of the assumptions underpinning the existing literature in terms of teachers’ research engagement and offer important new insights into the complex interplay between the signification, individual characteristics and organisational conditions that shape teachers’ relationships with research. In the following, the most significant and nuanced findings are discussed in relation to contemporary scholarship, and extrapolated into implications for theory, policy and practice.

Overall, the findings revealed that research is not used within schools as “neutral” knowledge to be implemented or rejected based solely on its epistemic merits. Rather, as [Baudrillard’s \(1968\)](#) theory of consumption would suggest, research functions as a multi-dimensional object of signification – with our data encompassing findings pertaining to pragmatic, institutional and symbolic dimensions of research use.

First, the study found that teachers signify research through its instrumental alignment with their immediate professional contexts. Indeed, the majority of the surveyed teachers declared themselves inclined to engage with research evidence if it supports their efforts to meet their students’ needs, spotlighting the classroom as a space within which research carries practical relevance. This finding aligns with previous studies where teachers were found to act as pragmatic consumers of research, seeking solutions meaningfully tailored to their real-world contexts (e.g. [Gleson et al., 2024](#); [Rickinson et al., 2022](#)).

Second, the surveyed teachers were found to signify research through their institutional value. That is to say, they reported being more likely to use research when they perceive that doing so directly supports their school’s efforts to better serve their community – a finding corroborating previous studies where institutional alignment fosters a sense of purpose in research use ([Coldwell et al., 2017](#); [Ion and López, 2022](#)). However, this deference to institutional agendas raises questions about teachers’ own intrinsic motivations. Our previous research found that compliance alone does not constitute an adequate basis for nurturing genuine enthusiasm towards research use or meaningful integration into everyday pedagogical practice (e.g. [Kowalczyk-Wałędziak and Ion, 2024](#)). Furthermore, the participants strongly agreed that using research evidence enhances a school’s reputation and attractiveness, suggesting that research engagement contributes to institutional prestige and appeal. Through the lens of Baudrillard’s framework, this desirable social value is achieved since research

carries a positive symbolic meaning, i.e. beyond the literal contents of its findings, for those who interact with the institution (including teachers considering research-driven schools as prospective work places, e.g. [Brown et al., 2022b](#)), to the point where it has become a positive element of the school's identity in their eyes. Importantly, this symbolic function operates alongside, rather than in opposition to, pragmatic concerns – teachers seem to value research for its capacity to simultaneously improve practice and signal institutional quality.

Third, the surveyed teachers signified research through its status as a marker of professional legitimacy. The high level of agreement with the survey item positing that research use is a hallmark of an effective profession suggests that they perceive research engagement not as an optional or supplementary activity, but as a definitive characteristic of teachers' optimal professionalism. This finding coheres with arguments that a high-quality teaching profession requires practitioners to engage critically with knowledge and adopt evidence-informed practices ([Kowalczyk-Wałędziak and Ion, 2024](#); [Mausethagen et al., 2025](#); [Wang et al., 2023](#)).

Our study also found that the teachers' signification of research was a profoundly social process – with research functioning as a collectively negotiated practice, rather than as an individual competence, a finding widely reported in the existing literature ([Cain, 2015](#); [Van Schaik et al., 2018](#)). The role of peer influence described by the teachers suggests that it is not always research findings themselves that carry appealing signification in their eyes; rather, the attraction comes from trusted or respected peers around them using research. Furthermore, the study revealed that the teachers perceived school leaders to be seeking out research content that would support their existing views or plans, thus exposing a complex dynamic in how research is signified institutionally. Whilst this instrumental use of research may lend credibility to leadership strategies, as [Ion and López \(2022\)](#) observe, it simultaneously risks positioning research as a tool for justification rather than genuine inquiry. This suggests that the signification of research within schools is contested terrain, shaped by power dynamics and institutional agendas as much as by epistemic considerations.

Together, these findings carry profound implications for efforts to promote research engagement. Traditional approaches that focus primarily on improving access to research or enhancing teachers' research literacy skills should be enriched by taking into account the vital role of signification itself. Indeed, there is a need to create conditions where research can be signified in the eyes of teachers as: relevant to the classroom challenges they face on a day-to-day basis; enhancing institutional quality; constitutive of professional excellence and a collectively valued practice. Simply providing more access to research or better findings summaries will not be impactful if the underlying signification remains unfavourable. As [Brown et al. \(2022b\)](#) argue using Baudrillard's framework, we can better understand research engagement through the lens of consumption – recognising that teachers' relationship with research is shaped not only by functional utility, but also by powerful symbolic meanings.

Perhaps the most striking finding from our study concerns what does *not* influence teachers' signification of research: namely, years of teaching experience. No significant correlation was found between teaching experience and any of the 14 signification items. The persistence of certain significations across experience levels suggests two possibilities. First, teachers' epistemic orientations towards research may be established early on – perhaps during initial teacher education – then remain relatively stable throughout the length of their careers. Second, and more likely given the reported strong influence of the organisational factors we identified, signification/s may be more dynamically responsive to contexts and conditions, than to accumulated years in the profession. Both possibilities seem to challenge those deficit models that attribute limited research engagement to teachers' insufficient experience or maturity, perhaps signposting directions for future research towards other, organisational or even societal factors.

In stark contrast to the negligible effect of teaching experience, organisational factors – particularly alignment with school goals, leadership practices and colleagues' research engagement – substantially influence teachers' signification of research. This pattern reveals how institutional and professional significations mutually reinforce each other: teachers who

signify research integration as a marker of quality for their school also signify it as a marker of quality for the profession as a whole, and vice versa. This reciprocal relationship suggests that efforts to promote research engagement would work best simultaneously at institutional and profession-wide levels. Alignment with school improvement priorities showed strong positive correlations with alignment to performance management targets and classroom needs, demonstrating that teachers regard school priorities, personal accountability and student needs as interconnected rather than competing concerns. This interconnection challenges simplistic dichotomies between “top-down” institutional demands and “bottom-up” teacher agency. Instead, our findings suggest that when institutional goals are perceived by teachers as genuinely serving their students’ needs, they can foster meaningful research engagement. However, as our previous research cautions and as noted above, this alignment must be authentic; compliance alone does not constitute adequate basis for sustained, meaningful research use (Kowalczyk-Wałędziak and Ion, 2024).

The significant positive relationships between collegial research use and multiple organisational alignment items reveal the fundamentally social nature of research signification. This finding extends beyond simple peer influence (e.g. Cain, 2015; Van Schaik *et al.*, 2018) to suggest that colleagues function as key mediators in how teachers interpret and make sense of research in relation to institutional priorities. Colleagues do not merely model research use; they actively shape the deeper meanings that research carries within the school context.

These findings offer profound implications for policies and practices aimed at fostering research-engaged teaching. First, teacher professional development initiatives should fundamentally shift from individual, experience-based programming towards cultivating supportive organisational ecologies. Rather than segmenting teachers by years of experience, efforts should focus on creating institutional conditions that support positive research signification across all career stages (Kirsten, 2020; Lehtonen *et al.*, 2015). Second, school leadership development must explicitly address leaders’ roles in shaping research cultures. This extends beyond providing resources or time for research; it requires leaders to actively model research engagement, create structures for collective inquiry and ensure that research becomes woven into strategic priorities (Ion and Lopez, 2022; Xun and Barkhuizen, 2025). Leadership influence operates not only at the behavioural level but at the level of meaning-making itself, shaping how teachers understand and value research, not simply whether or not they engage with it in the first place. Third, fostering collegial research engagement requires intentional community-building. This might involve establishing collaborative inquiry groups, creating spaces for research-related discussions and recognising research engagement as a legitimate professional task (e.g. Christensen and Jerrim, 2025). Peer learning mechanisms – such as lesson study, teacher research networks or collaborative action research – may be particularly powerful for shifting collective significations. Fourth, alignment with school improvement priorities emerges as essential yet potentially problematic. Whilst institutional alignment can foster purposeful research engagement, an overly instrumental alignment of research with institutional agendas risks reducing research use to a compliance exercise rather than a professionally meaningful practice (Mausethagen *et al.*, 2025). Schools and systems must therefore balance strategic alignment with spaces for teacher-initiated inquiry, ensuring that research engagement serves both institutional goals and teachers’ own sense of professional curiosity and autonomy.

Integrating findings from both research questions, this study makes three key theoretical contributions. First, we demonstrate that research signification operates as a socially constructed, contextually embedded phenomenon rather than an individual, developmentally determined characteristic. This challenges both deficit models that attribute limited research engagement to individual teachers’ capacities or dispositions, and linear developmental models that assume career stage determines research readiness. Instead, our findings redirect attention to organisational conditions and collective cultures as primary shapers of how teachers make meaning out of research. Second, by applying Baudrillard’s (1968) semiotic

theory of consumption to teachers' research engagement, we extend existing frameworks that focus primarily on access, comprehension and utility. Our findings demonstrate that teachers' relationships with research cannot be fully understood through rational choice models that assume they simply weigh costs and benefits. Rather, research engagement is fundamentally shaped by symbolic meanings constructed through institutional cultures, peer-to-peer interactions and leadership practices (Eriksen, 2022; Mausethagen *et al.*, 2025). This semiotic lens offers new theoretical purchase for solving persistent puzzles in research engagement scholarship, such as why increased access to research does not automatically translate into increased use, or why some schools develop research-rich cultures and others do not despite having access to similar resources. Third, our findings reveal the multidimensional nature of research signification – pragmatic, institutional, and symbolic – and demonstrate how these dimensions interact and mutually reinforce each other. Teachers do not signify research in singular ways; they simultaneously value its practical utility, its capacity to enhance institutional reputation and its role in defining professional excellence (Mausethagen *et al.*, 2025). This multiplicity suggests that interventions focusing on only one dimension (e.g. exclusively emphasising practical or professional relevance) may achieve limited success. Ultimately, our study suggests that effective approaches must engage all three dimensions of signification.

Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, both signification and research engagement were operationalised through self-reported items within the same survey instrument, introducing potential common method bias. The observed associations should therefore be interpreted as reflecting co-occurring patterns in teachers' self-perceptions rather than as evidence of a directional relationship between the two constructs. Second, self-reporting more broadly may have introduced social desirability effects, with participants potentially overstating their research engagement. Third, although the sample spans five countries, each national sub-sample was relatively small, limiting generalisability both within these particular contexts and beyond them. Finally, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference: it is not possible to determine whether school-level conditions shape signification, or vice versa.

Therefore, in order to strengthen the validity and contribution of this study to the knowledge base, future research could, for example, use qualitative methods, e.g. interviews, observations or case studies, in order to access richer insights into the relationships between teachers' signification and use of research. Furthermore, since this study rests on self-reported measures, further studies could gather evidence on actual research use in practice – yielding data that would shape more concrete, validated implications for policy and practice. Longitudinal designs would allow causal relationships to be examined over time. Finally, comparative studies using larger numbers of participants could build a more comprehensive understanding of these relationships across and between these socio-cultural contexts and beyond.

Conclusion

The findings of our study reveal that teachers engage significantly more with research when they themselves signify it as relevant, useful, and having a positive impact on their students, their classroom practice, and their school. While the participants' years of teaching experience do not appear to impact their perceptions of whether or not research is a worthwhile addition to their professional practice, other factors do, namely: their school's goals, their school's leadership and their colleagues' engagement in research. By focusing on the role of signification in shaping teachers' research use, this study extends existing knowledge beyond the functional utility of research, out to the importance of symbolic meanings that teachers

attribute to research. In today's "post-truth" world, teachers who signify research in positive ways are strongly positioned to equip students to actively shape their own and collective ideas, as a means to navigate complex realities – making this work both theoretically significant and urgently practical.

Note

1. This item was adapted to each one of the national context, considering the local rankings of schools according to their level of complexity.

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