

# Schools' research hubs put insights into action

By ANDERS FURZE

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## Financial Review Focus Innovation in education Financial Review Focus Innovation in education

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Children's experiences of remote learning have shown that social interaction remains integral to the learning process, even for children who are often seen as "digital natives", research from Sydney's Barker College suggests.

"It was obvious from student responses that they favoured being in the classroom with their friends clearly revealing learning as a social act," the report concludes. "So, too, was the fact that even the so-called 'digital natives' require non-digital interactions."

The research was part of the school's flagship Barker Journey project, a longitudinal study following the experience of a group of students going through the school. It also reflects a growing trend in education: an increasing recognition of the importance of schools conducting research, whether through their own, dedicated research centres, or partnerships with universities.

"[Research centres] benefit both staff in how they grow as educators, thinkers and leaders, and benefit the students and the school community as well," says Dr Matthew Hill, director of the Barker Institute.

"The benefit of formalising a research institute in the school is that it's not just celebrating good ideas 'out there', but it's trying to create our own ideas as well. We invite staff to be contributors, creators and researchers."

Given teachers are doing informal research

every day they're on the job, more formalised research centres are a natural next step says Dr Sarah Loch, director of Pymble Ladies' College's Pymble Institute.

"[As teachers] we're asking, 'The next time I take this unit, what could I change to improve it?' Or, 'The next time I run this event, what would I

do differently?' We're often doing it in our heads, and this approach encourages you to get out of your head and have other people see and contribute to it."

Reflecting the wide variety of approaches to education across the country, research centres in schools come in all shapes and sizes. Some might focus on refining a particular teaching methodology, while others focus on a specific research discipline or take a broader view.

Melbourne's Genazzano FCJ College, for example, is home to the Genazzano Institute of Learning and Brain Sciences, which aims to improve learning outcomes by leveraging advances in neuroscience, environmental design, psychology, education, health and information technology. Boys' school Brighton Grammar, meanwhile, hosts the Crowther Centre, an education and school improvement consultancy offering masterclasses and webinars on everything from being a great teacher to positive models of masculinity.

Pymble Ladies' College established its Pymble Institute to empower teachers and students to engage in the research process while also being critical consumers of research, Loch says. Because the centre is found in a girls' school, the focus is on women and girls' education.

Loch is a big believer in the power of action research, a tried and tested research methodology commonly used in fields such as education and healthcare, where frontline workers research possible changes that they think will make their work better.

"When you're in a large system, you don't always feel empowered to be able to make that sort of difference," she says. "Action research is designed so that you can change something, take some sort of action, which will help bring equity, change or justice."

The outputs from school research centres are

many and varied, ranging from public talks that share ideas with the school community and other

educators, to classroom interventions and articles published in academic journals. Many schools also publish their own journals. The Pymble Institute publishes *Illuminate*, which highlights teacher research and innovation, and *Perspective*, which showcases the research success of students. The Crowther Centre hosts a range of position papers on various topics relating to parenting and raising kids, while the Barker Institute publishes a *Learning in Practice* journal and Scots College has published a research paper series since 2013.

At Barker College, the Barker Institute encourages close-to-practice research, innovation and professional development. The institute also sets each year's research agenda. This year's four research domains are co-education, Indigenous education, character and enterprise education, intercultural education, and future and innovation.

"Research can't just exist outside of the school context. It needs to happen within the school, and we're tremendously blessed to have staff who understand research and have participated in research, and we want to continue to allow them to be doing that in that school context," Hill says.

As well as creating the insights needed to drive innovation in education, research centres can also be a place of depth and reflection for teachers and students alike, which is particularly useful in times of intense and ongoing disruption.

"It's quite amazing, you know, you're asking busy people to do more for their students, and they do. They want to, they see it as a worthwhile part of their busy day," Loch says.

"They say 'yes, I'll do a master's project in that', or 'I'd love to do an action research project' or 'yes, I'll write for your journal' ... It helps bridge the divide between all the research that's put into journals ... and classrooms and student experiences."



**Dr Matthew Hill, director of the Barker Institute**

**at Sydney's Barker College, and, inset, Dr Sarah Loch, director of Pymble Ladies' College's Pymble Institute, believe research can improve the classroom.**

**"Research centres benefit both staff in how they grow as educators, thinkers and leaders, and benefit the students and the school community as well."**

Matthew Hill