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# Relational Knowledge Exchange: Reshaping School-University Partnerships

**Dr Kate Duffy**



The Researching Teacher

Momentum Learning Collaborative Conference 4-5<sup>th</sup> March 2026, Norwich





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## Aim of the session

Explore the possibility of a new way of schools working with universities to *co-create knowledge* rather than ‘consuming it’



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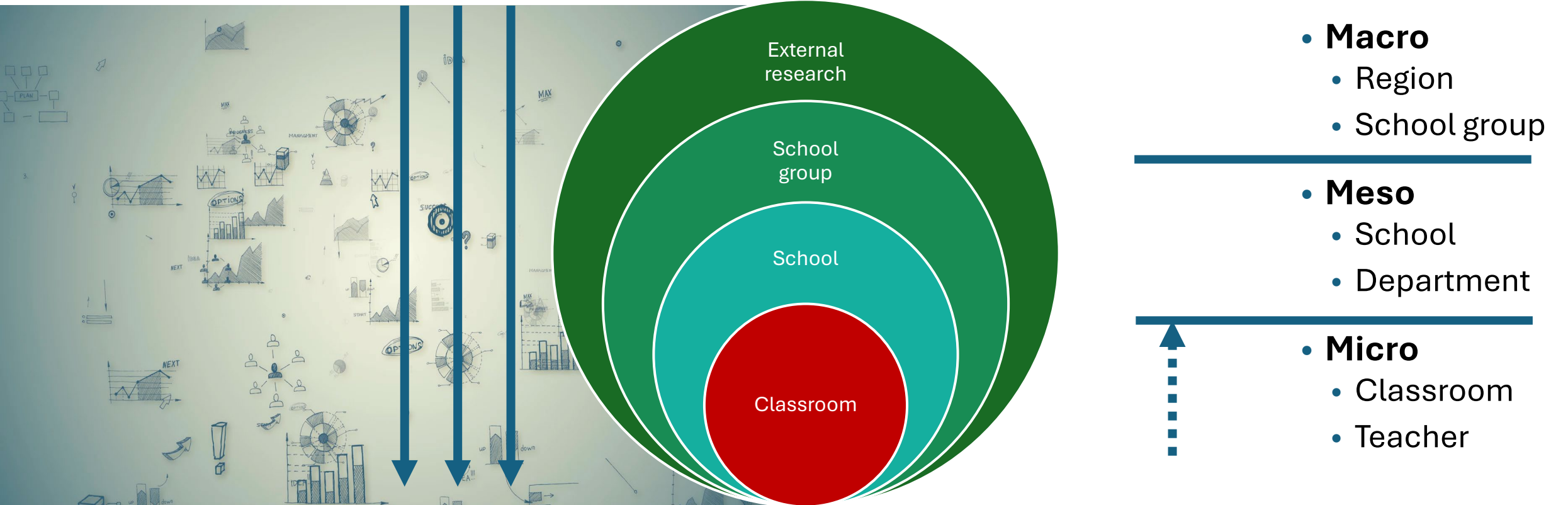
# Our vision: Foster Research Culture and Identity in Education

- Schools and universities can work as *equal partners* in knowledge creation—not hierarchically.
- No knowledge transfer can happen without a strong relational foundation (Sidorkin, 2022)
- Knowledge is socially constructed and personal in meaning
- **Research is not a commodity to be given to schools** but something to be co-generated through relationship (Duffy, et al 2025 Dismore, et al 2024)



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# Why we care about school-sector research



# Becoming a Research School....

- Reflect upon **what it means** to be a research school
  - Identify two benefits
  - Identify two challenges

# Sunderland's distinctive approach: *Relational Knowledge Exchange*

Our approach rests on collaboration, reciprocity and trust and Identify building. Over time ...

## **Remove Hierarchies**

- Teachers and academics *both* positioned as researchers.
- Research knowledge is co-constructed, not transferred.
- Opportunity to reimagine the valued type of research in education

## **Build Communities, Not Compliance**

- Using dialogic, participatory methods, action research cycles).
- Teachers feel heard, validated, and empowered.

## **Value Process as much as Product**

- ARTs and PAR foreground learning, identity-building, and relational transformation—not just outputs.



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# Sunderland's Philosophy 'The Relational Turn'

- **Underpinned by Deacon's FPR model**
  - Demystify research language
  - Scaffold transitions into researcher identity
  - Use high-challenge/high-support relational facilitation
- **Relational pedagogy frameworks** (Hickey & Riddle, Feng & Wood)
- Knowledge develops through connection
  - Academic development should be relational, not transactional

## • **Agile Research Teams**

## • **Research (co-Lab) Schools**



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# Why work alongside us?

- **You get research that actually solves *your* problems - We start with *your* priorities**—attendance, behaviour, curriculum design, wellbeing, phonics, vocabulary, early reading, SEND, whatever matters most to your context.
- **Your teachers develop as researchers—without extra workload**
  - how to ask powerful questions
  - how to evaluate impact
  - how to use evidence to guide decisions
  - how to build their own inquiry cycles
- And because the structure is *agile* and time-bound, teachers contribute only what they can manage.
- **Developing a research school culture**
  - Develop in-house research capacity
  - Reduce dependence on external consultants
  - Strengthen curriculum and pedagogy with real evidence generated internally
- **You get external expertise *without* the hierarchy**



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# Agile Research Teams (ARTs)

- Create a manageable and sustainable continuum of credible **research activity** among practitioners.
- Establish, support and build researcher **relationships** across teams and disciplines, bringing together **diverse expertise**
- Valuing the **process** of relational opportunities within 'Research & Knowledge Exchange' (RKE) as much as the **product** of the process.



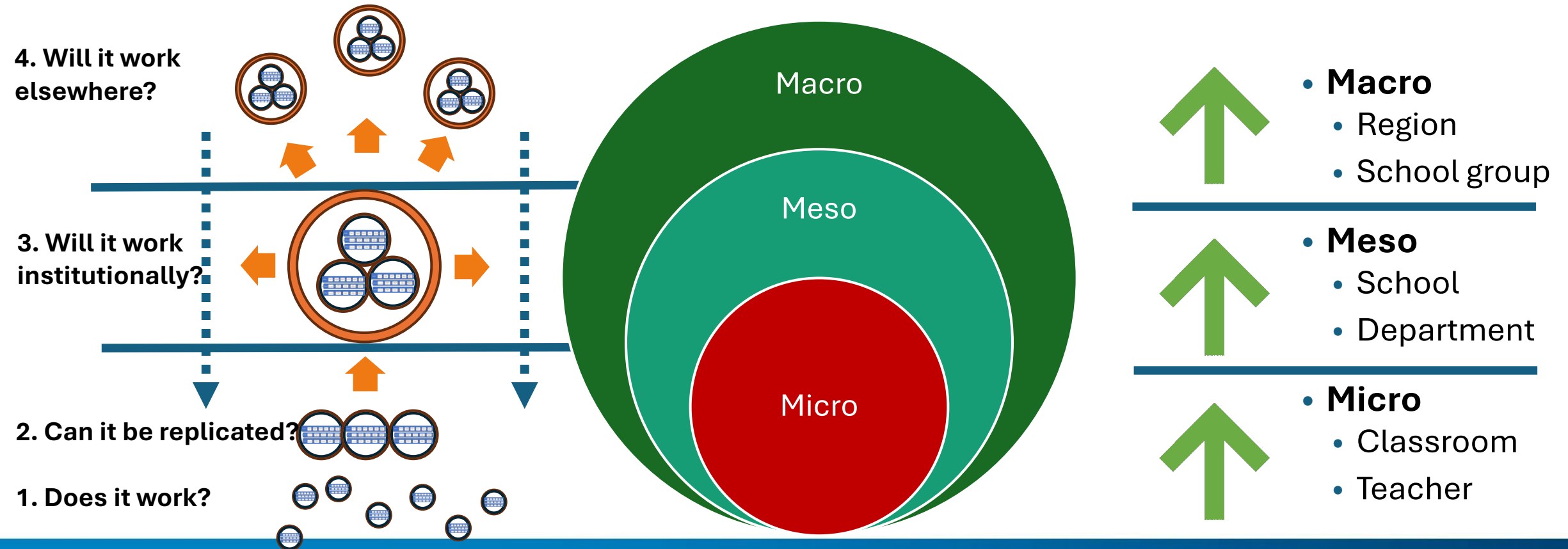
Duffy, K., Hidson, E., & Deacon, L. (2025) Facilitating practice-led research culture in initial teacher training: the case of Agile Research Teams (ARTs) . Exchanges: the Interdisciplinary Research Journal



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# How can practice-led research influence the sector?



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# Agile Research Teams (ARTs) – How they work?

- Small (4–5 person) mixed teams
- Non-hierarchical
- Meet monthly
- Everyone contributes according to capacity
- Facilitated but co-owned
- Built on trust, shared purpose, ongoing dialogue
- Allowing teachers to bring their own research questions
- Treating teachers as knowledge generators
- Allowing academics to step into practice spaces as learners too
- Reducing research anxiety by scaffolding the work

# Teams – mutual learning and development

<b>Intensive Teaching and Practice (ITaP)</b>	Evaluating pedagogical innovation in initial teacher education programme
<b>Feedforward Assessment</b>	Impact of our feedforward targets for improving HE students' performance – collaboration between two universities.
<b>Mini Mind</b>	Interdisciplinary, working with external partners and schools to develop positive psychology practice in primary schools.
<b>UET English &amp; Maths Networks</b>	Working alongside UET colleagues to develop a framework for building a research culture and research schools
<b>EYFS curriculum design for school readiness</b>	Working alongside a private nursery on curriculum literacy with their staff and community.
<b>Vocabulary practice</b>	Developing impactful vocabulary practice across primary schools in a Multi Academy Trust.
<b>Pondering Phonics</b>	Comparative case studies of different DfE validated Phonics Schemes.



Issue 22: Embedding a culture of research in schools

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# Research (Lab) Schools



John Baumber: Visiting Professor @UoS



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# Next steps: maintaining momentum

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- Contact us and keep in touch!
- We're happy to share materials and handbooks (and pre-prints) when they are released
- We may be able to provide some free support with ARTs and research activity
- We are applying for funding to set up short course, facilitated versions of our ARTs
- <https://forms.office.com/e/0iAtrueRgn>
- [interaction@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:interaction@sunderland.ac.uk)



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