

How does research move to, among and around teachers?



Briefing for Researchers

There is a vast range of research available that can provide a powerful basis for dialogue about what matters in primary education and how this can be achieved through policy and practice. Much of this may be missed by teachers and schools in England.

Introduction

This briefing was produced as a result of a research project which explored teachers' encounters with literacy research. It will be of interest to all those with an interest in strengthening relationships between research and education in including researchers within and outside universities, organisations that engage in research and research funding bodies. The project focused on teachers' encounters with literacy research in the primary phase but the recommendations are also relevant to other phases, curricular subjects and aspects of teaching.

Research using a wide range of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches can inform educational policy and practice by:

- *Evaluating and developing approaches to teaching and learning literacy*
- *Informing critical evaluation of current policy and practice*
- *Providing insights into the experiences of teachers and learners*
- *Supporting creative and imaginative thinking about future plans and possibilities for literacy education*

If educators and policymakers focus only on certain kinds of research (such as those addressing specific topics or using a narrow range of methodologies) then potentially fruitful ways of supporting children's literacy learning in primary schools may be missed. Literacy research emanating from different perspectives can play an important role in developing inclusive and empowering literacy education which challenges inequalities and ensures children are equipped for their current and future lives¹.

The Research Mobilities in Primary Literacy Education project² (2022-2024) investigated the kinds of literacy research that teachers encounter and how literacy research moves to, among and around teachers. Researchers used multiple methods including: interviews, focus groups and lifelogging with teachers, analyses of newspaper and social media and other approaches. These included: detailed interviews, lifelogging and focus groups involving 44 teachers working in a variety of settings; analysis of corpora including 426 newspaper articles and over 31600 twitter interactions; tracings of 9 examples of research/research related materials utilising a range of digital and qualitative methods.

Overall Findings

Project findings provide insights into how research mobilises that are relevant to researchers, research organisations and funding bodies interested in how research can be shared in ways that invite engagement from teachers and schools.

The Research Mobilities project found that:

1. Research is encountered in many ways in a variety of physical and digital spaces, driven by national, school and/or trust priorities as well as by teachers' own interests and concerns.

Teachers encounter research through a variety of channels including school and national policy frameworks, CPD, Masters courses, email alerts from organisations and social media as well as friends, family and colleagues. Many individuals and organisations mediate literacy research, including universities and other research organisations such as Education Endowment Foundation, government and organisations such as Ofsted, literacy charities, professional associations, thinktanks, school leaders, publishers, independent consultants and consultancies as well as teachers themselves. They vary considerably in their expertise and experience in literacy, research and/or primary education. Judgements about the credibility and legitimacy of research sources are difficult within this crowded landscape.

2. Research findings are frequently presented in ways that make critical evaluation difficult and credibility hard to judge. This is because:

- a) Research rarely appears to teachers as a journal article or report but more often as sets of guidelines, resources, schemes and interventions or as research summaries or reviews. This makes it difficult to juxtapose the findings from different studies or methodologies. Sometimes guidelines, resources, schemes and interventions are presented as 'research-informed' or 'evidence-based' but their relationship to research is not possible to trace.
- b) Limitations and caveats are rarely mentioned. As research findings are communicated to teachers, nuances can be erased and information about methodologies omitted, e.g. as findings are summarised in a tweet, bullet points or infographic or are embedded in a resource, intervention or training session. Very little attention is paid to concepts or underpinning ideas. When methods are described they can be difficult to understand due to technical terms.
- c) Research findings can become confused, distorted or diluted as they are broken down and presented in different forms and in different places. Sometimes they accumulate additional meanings, e.g. as they combine with other ideas or are interpreted in new ways.
- d) Teachers can find it hard to trace the methods underpinning research they encounter. When methods are described they may be difficult to understand due to technical terms.

3. Teachers experience the relationship between research and practice in different ways and have different priorities, interests and concerns when they engage with research.

Some schools/trusts provide space for teacher enquiry and professional dialogue about research while some teachers pursue research in their own time. Others have limited opportunities. Teachers can find it difficult to access research or to identify research that is relevant to their interests. Some teachers do not want to or do not have capacity to engage with research due to other pressures and can feel that a narrow range of research is imposed on them. The sense of imposition erodes their motivation to engage. Given pressure to conform they may lose sight of alternative ideas and insights.

4. Successful mobilisation of research does not always reflect research quality and valuable research findings do not always reach the public eye.

Research findings may be more likely to be adopted when they are encountered repeatedly in different places and/or when they resonate with existing beliefs or address requirements, such as those specified by government or Ofsted.

5. The research that teachers encounter tends to relate a narrow range of topics, missing many relevant opportunities to offer additional insights.

Specifically, the Research Mobilities project found a much greater emphasis on reading than writing and an absence of topics that are highly relevant to literacy in the contemporary context. These include critical literacy, digital media and multilingualism.



"I think the social aspect of it is really important as well, having a strong network of people to draw upon who are also interested."

Teacher 12



Recommendations for researchers, research organisations and funding bodies

1. Ensure that research is communicated to teachers in ways that encourage engagement:

Involve stakeholders throughout the lifetime of the project (from design to dissemination) in developing creative, participatory and inclusive strategies for communication and engagement.

Ensure findings are understandable and enticing to a lay audience, e.g. using images, short videos, animation, infographics and soundfiles designed to prompt discussion.

Draw on a range of formats, cross referencing academic findings to summaries, reports and/or accounts in different channels, e.g. professional media, events, social media, blogs, podcasts, project websites that incorporate links to professional practice.

2. Ensure that research is accessible to teachers by:

Making research findings freely available to teachers, e.g. publication under Creative Commons licences.

Engaging with individuals and organisations that play a role in mediating research to identify opportunities to share research with different groups on and offline, e.g. trusts, professional and subject associations, educational charities, policy bodies and online communities.

3. Ensure it is possible to trace the basis on which claims are made by:

Linking research summaries to freely available documents that outline methodology, context and any limitations.

4. Communicate research findings in ways that open out professional discussion rather than narrowing in on certain 'truths' by:

Sharing research in imaginative ways that allow critical engagement and invite dialogue about connections to practice, e.g. using visualisations that acknowledge complexity, suggesting questions for reflection.

Developing forms of research summary and review that reflect the nuance and complexity of underpinning research and which feature research using a range of methodologies.

Promote the value of different kinds of research & research/practice connections (see Research Connections box).

5. Communicate research findings in ways that open out professional discussion rather than narrowing in on certain 'truths' by:

Ensuring that communication and impact strategies are fully planned and resourced.

6. Nurture opportunities to reflect on research findings from projects underpinned by diverse perspectives and methodologies by:

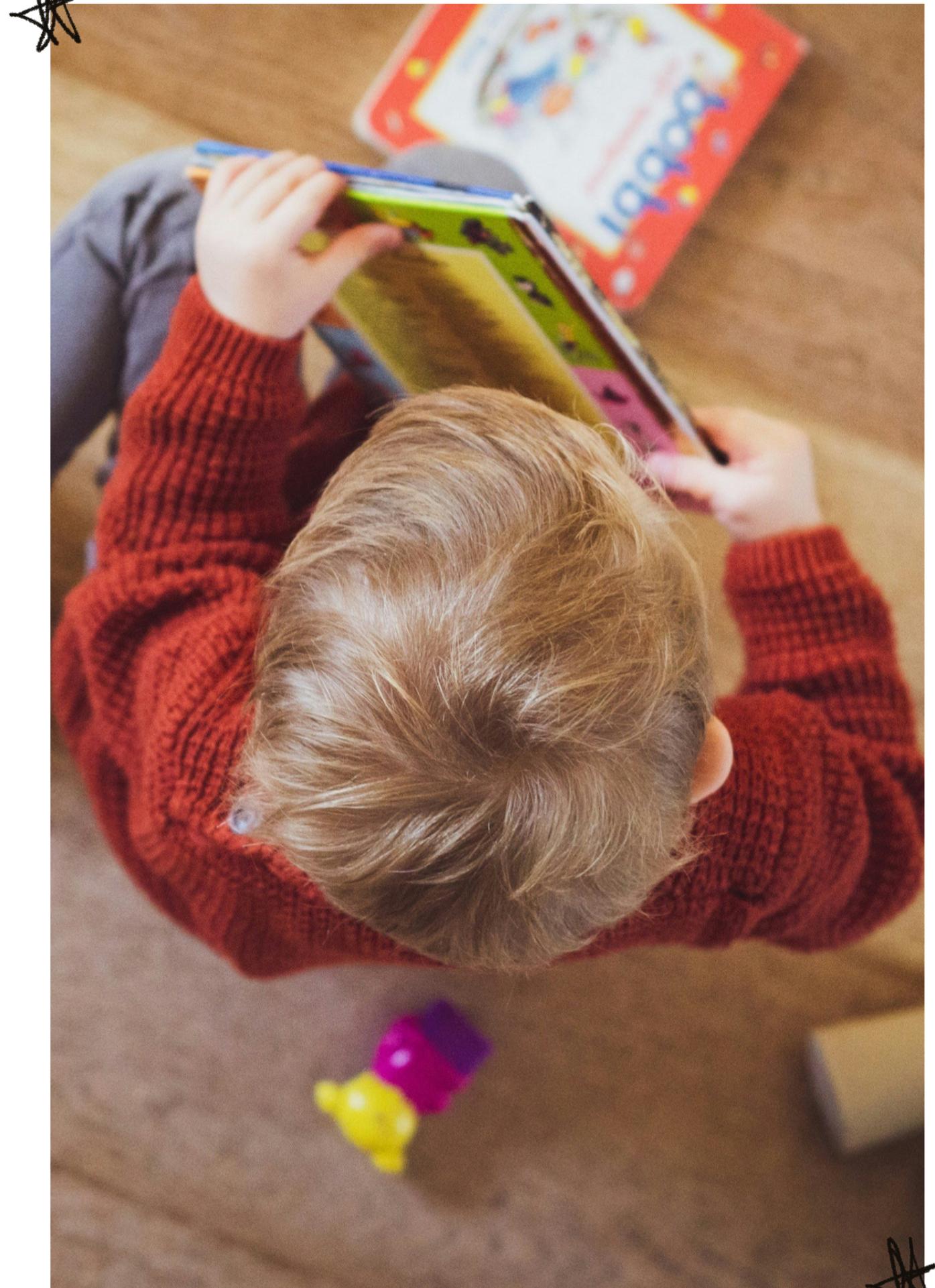
Planning impact-related activities, events and publications that juxtapose findings from different research paradigms to provide multiple insights into a topic, interest or concern.

Planning for collaborative work across research centres and institutions that is effectively supported and funded.

Involving a range of stakeholders in interpreting and responding to research findings, e.g. teachers, policy makers, school/trust leaders, professional associations.

“I mean we’re working with children - there’s never going to be a one-size-fits-all solution”

Teacher panel member 1



Connecting Research and Practice

Research connects to practice through:

- *Guiding response (e.g. how to teach, how to respond, what to do) ‘What (might) work?’*
- *Providing insights (e.g. how children learn, how children feel, literacies in the home) ‘Why...?’*
- *Providing inspiration for how to investigate children’s experience (by modelling methods of data collection or analysis that might provide new insights, e.g. artistic or creative approaches) ‘What’s going on...?’*
- *Advancing critique (e.g. about: scope and range of literacy education; embedded inequalities; value of a resource/scheme) ‘How else...?’*
- *Prompting imaginative leaps (how might things be different; what might be possible and/or desirable?) ‘What if...?’*



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Further information about this project can be accessed at: <https://research.shu.ac.uk/rmple>

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¹ Burnett, C. (2022). Scoping the field of literacy research: how might a range of research be valuable to primary teachers? <http://doi.org/10.7190/shu-working-papers/2201>

² For further details on project methodology and findings see Burnett, C., Adams, G., Gillen, J., Thompson, T.L., Shannon, D., Shetty, P. (2024). Research Mobilities in Primary Literacy Education: Interrogating how teachers encounter research in an age of evidence-based teaching. Routledge. Open access and via <https://research.shu.ac.uk/rmple>.



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