

How does research about literacy education move to, among and around teachers?



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 is 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 teacher educators who are interested in supporting trainees to strengthen relationships between research and practice and to draw on a wide range of evidence to inform and/or inspire their teaching. The project focused on teachers' encounters with literacy in the primary phase but the recommendations are also relevant to other phases, curricular subjects and aspects of the teaching role.

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

- *Evaluating and developing approaches to teaching and learning*
- *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. Research emanating from different perspectives can play an important role in developing inclusive and empowering educational provision which challenges inequalities and ensures children are equipped for their current and future lives.

The Research Mobilities in Primary Literacy Education project¹ (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

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, 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. 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) Research or 'evidence' tends to be presented as 'truth'. 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.
- 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 mean we're working with children - there's never going to be a one-size-fits-all solution"

Teacher panel member 1

“How do you decide what’s quality?”



It comes back to where it’s come from, doesn’t it really. I think who’s recommended it, whether you’ve just sort of happened upon it and the sorts of people that have then engaged with it themselves as well.”



Recommendations for teacher educators

1. Provide time and space for teacher trainees to reflect on research through:

Nurturing a culture in which teacher trainees feel free to explore alternative perspectives.

Facilitating professional discussion which focuses on research.

Drawing on research to open out professional debate rather than to close it down.

2. Encouraging trainees to engage with different kinds of research through:

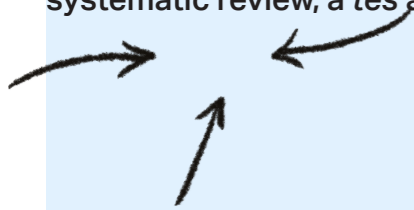
Engaging with networks and professional/subject associations that facilitate encounters with a broad range of research.

3. Enabling critical engagement through:

Encouraging critical evaluation and appreciation of evidence derived from diverse methodologies and ensure they are confident in doing so.

Making time for teacher trainees to consider the credibility of the sources they encounter and reflect critically on research accessed through a range of forms (including those which summarise or synthesise research, e.g. podcast, blog post, research review or summary).

Providing opportunities for trainees to review how/if meanings differ as research appears in different forms, e.g. through comparing accounts of research findings as they appear in a primary source (e.g. peer reviewed article written by researcher), a research summary or systematic review, a *tes* article and/or podcast.



4. Encourage teachers to engage with research for different purposes through:

Providing opportunities for teacher trainees to investigate questions that link to their professional concerns and interests and engage in professional enquiry.

Providing opportunities for students to develop/contribute to small-scale, collaborative research projects, building on existing research.

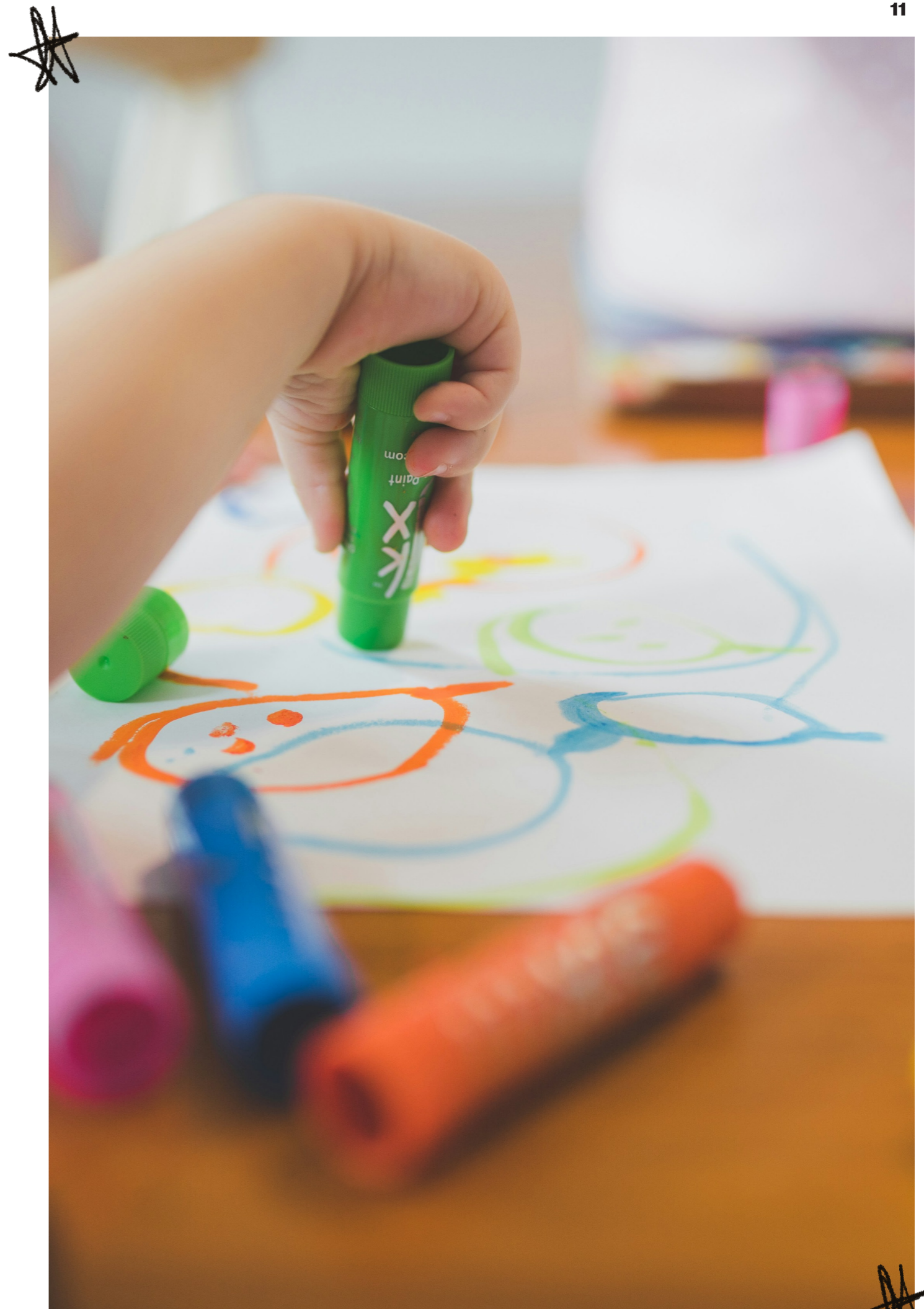
Drawing on research to inform practice in different ways, e.g. to inform approaches to teaching and learning, to support critical evaluation of current practice, to raise questions about learners' experiences and/or support imaginative and creative thinking about future possibilities – to explore 'why', 'what else', 'so what' and 'what if?'



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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¹For 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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Briefing for Teacher Educators*

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