

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

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**Briefing for Independent Consultants**

**There is a vast range of research available that can inform literacy education in important ways. Much of this is missed with negative implications for literacy education now and in the future.**

## **Introduction**

Many schools and trusts draw on the support of consultants to inform their provision for literacy. This briefing summarises findings from a research project which explored teachers' encounters with literacy research. It will be of interest to consultants who are interested in developing their own knowledge and critical thinking about literacy education and the support they give to schools. The project focused on the primary phase but the recommendations may also be relevant to those working in other phases.

Literacy matters. Through making, exchanging and using text we connect with others, explore what we know and feel, make a stand and make things happen. In a world in which digital media are central to personal, social, civic, economic and political life, being able to create, interpret, innovate, evaluate and communicate has arguably never been more important. There is a need to ensure that literacy education reflects the communicative needs of everyday life which involve skilful, creative, flexible, collaborative and critical engagement with a wide range of digital and print texts. This is as true for young children as it is for adults<sup>1</sup>.

Literacy is understood and researched in many different ways using methodologies that include a range of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches<sup>2</sup>. This extensive range of literacy research 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 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 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 lives.

**The Research Mobilities in Primary Literacy Education project<sup>3</sup> (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. 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.

4. 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 and 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. Consultants may face similar challenges particularly if they do not have access to a university library.

5. The research shared often reflects schools' existing concerns which understandably tend to relate to government priorities. Consequently, they focus on research which relates to 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





# Recommendations for Independent Consultants

1. Cite the research sources that underpin advice, training and materials.
2. Engage teachers in critical dialogue about research findings and open-ended discussions about how research may connect to practice.
3. Encourage teachers to consider how different kinds of research might help them reflect on aspects of literacy education in their schools: not only help to decide 'what (might) work' but to consider 'why', 'what else' 'so what'...and 'what if?' Conferences, publications and guidelines produced by organisations such as The United Kingdom Literacy Association and National Association for Teaching of English produce resources that may support with this.
4. Acknowledge the limitations of research you cite whether these findings are based on qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods studies or research reviews or summaries. When evaluating research, apply criteria that are appropriate to the research being considered. For example when evaluating qualitative research evaluate how far the research design enabled in-depth insights into experiences, events or perceptions. Be clear not just about what research claims but also what it is not possible to claim based on the research methods used. Research reviews and summaries can be very useful but be cautious in using them as they necessarily omit detail on the studies they draw upon. They are designed to address certain questions and use specific criteria when identifying research to include. This may mean that relevant studies are excluded that are relevant to the topic or theme you are addressing. Note whether or not research publications have been peer reviewed and also any funders.
5. Access research directly by using Access To Research at your local library, through freely available versions of reports or articles via university websites or by contacting researchers via email. Researchers are often more than happy to share their work and may also collaborate on projects.
6. Ensure underpinning sources, methodologies and ideas are indicated when summarising research so that people can trace the original research if they need to. Consider sharing alternative/additional research sources for those teachers who want to explore further.
7. Recognising that teachers' CPD time is short, provide information through a number of channels, supplementing face-to-face meetings with social media content, for example.

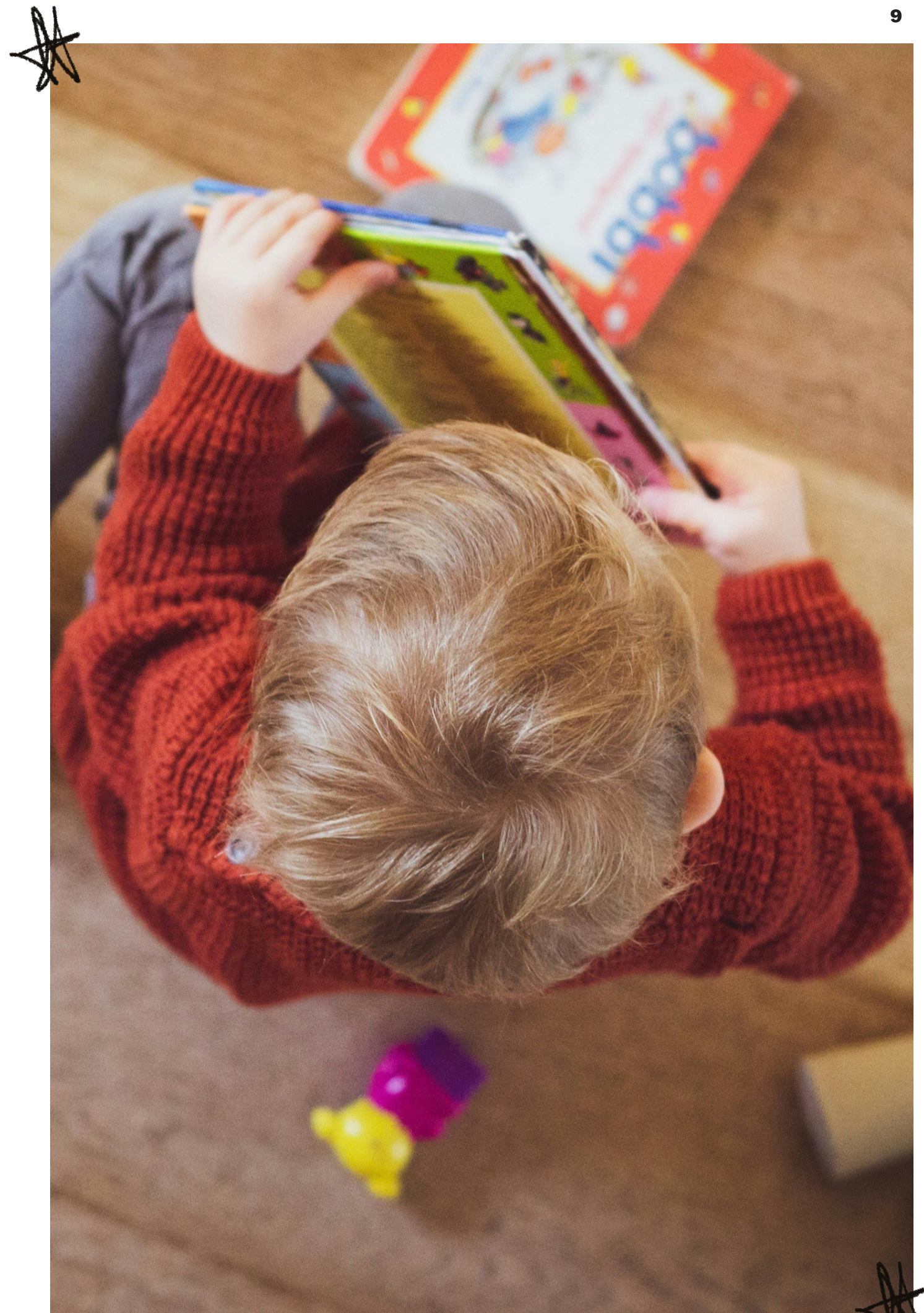




# Connecting Research and Practice

*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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<sup>1</sup>Marsh, J, Mascheroni, G, Carrington, V, Árnadóttir, H, Brito, R, Dias, R, Kupiainen, R and Trueltzsch-Wijnen, C (2017). The online and offline digital literacy practices of young children: a review of the literature (full report). COST Action IS1410. Produced by members of The Digital Literacy and Multimodal Practices of Young Children Network, a COST action supported by the European Commission for the period 2015–2019. More at [www.digilitey.eu](http://www.digilitey.eu)

<sup>2</sup>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>

<sup>3</sup>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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