

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



Briefing for Policy Makers

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

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^{1,2}.

Literacy is understood and researched in many different ways using methodologies that include a range of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches³. 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 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 lives.

The Research Mobilities in Primary Literacy Education project⁴ (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 in Primary Literacy Education project found that teachers' encounters with literacy research focus mainly on a narrow range of topics. These include those that feature in policy and wider public debates. They neglect many topics that are highly pertinent to literacy learning. These include those that are central to the current National Curriculum for English, such as writing, as well as those essential to literacy in contemporary life such as critical literacy.

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.

Research evidence is mediated by a wide range of organisations and individuals including policy makers, researchers, consultants, thinktanks, companies, professional associations and other charitable organisations as well as school leaders and teachers themselves. They vary considerably in their experience and expertise in literacy, research and primary education.

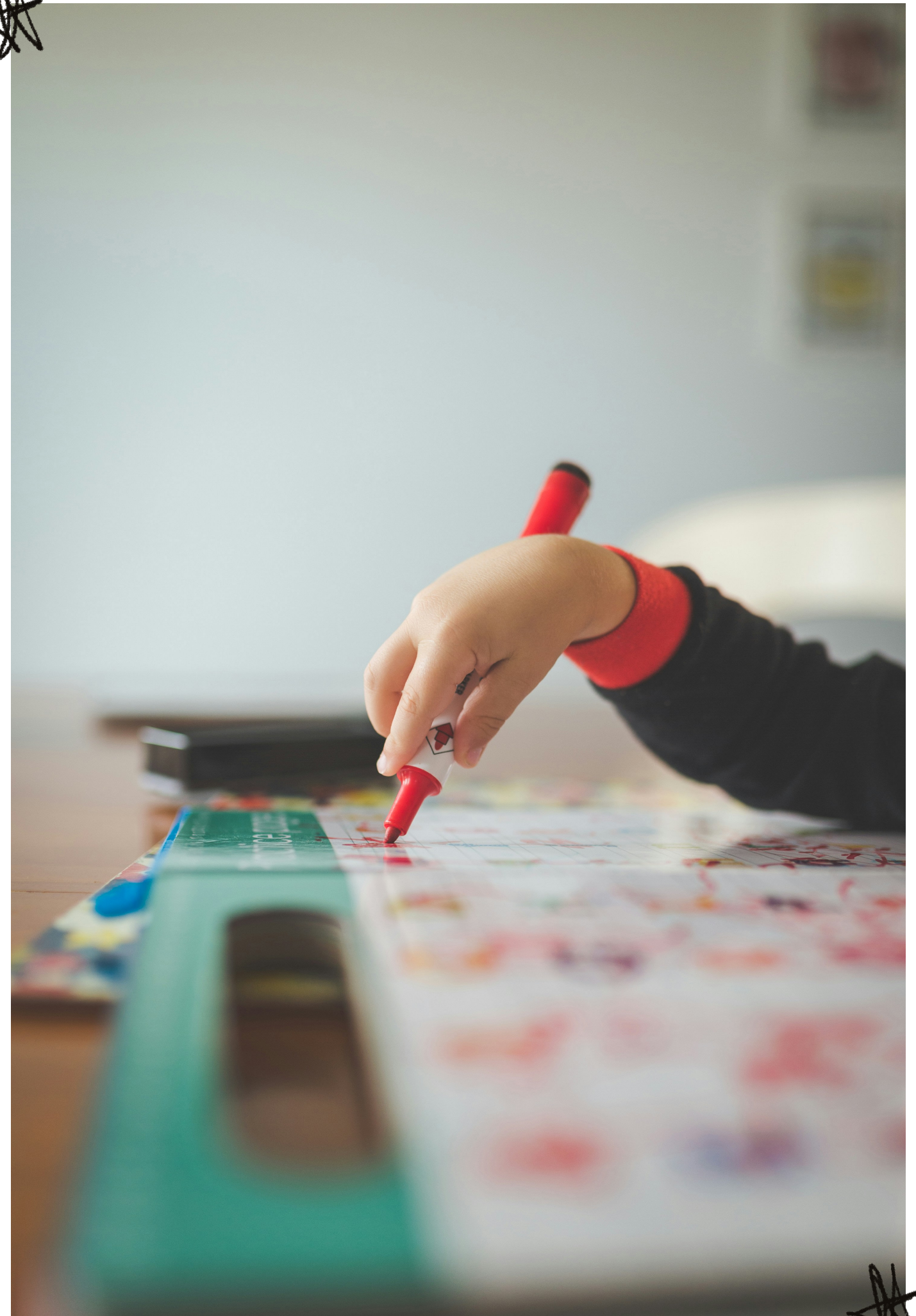
Successful mobilisation of research does not always reflect research quality. Research evidence is frequently presented in ways that make critical evaluation difficult and credibility hard to judge.

The most valued encounters with research often involve professional dialogue and reflection.

These findings have significant implications for how literacy and research are approached in educational policy and practice and for teachers as professionals.

"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



“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.”

Teacher 43

Recommendations for policy makers

1. Ensure that literacy education policy draws on research from a range of disciplines and using diverse methodologies by:

- Devising consultation processes that invite a range of possible responses that build on different types of evidence including qualitative as well as quantitative data.
- Drawing on the expertise of those with experience of producing and/or drawing on research in a diversity of ways, e.g. literacy researchers working in different disciplines, representatives from literacy/English associations and cross-institutional research networks, teachers' groups and school leaders.
- Convening roundtable events to engage directly with literacy researchers from a range of disciplines and using diverse methodologies in considering the aims and purposes of literacy education in the short, medium and long term.

2. Develop professional learning frameworks for initial and continuing professional development that:

- Encourage engagement with research using a range of methodologies.
- Encourage critical readings of research that are sensitive to different methodologies.
- Support teachers to pursue professional enquiry and invite critical reflection on the origins of information encountered.
- Facilitate open-ended professional dialogue and reflection on research.
- Engage with research for a range of purposes: to address current priorities, to reflect on the purpose and range of literacy education and to imagine new possibilities.

Findings: Literacy

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, consultancies and teachers themselves. The research they share is targeted to schools' existing concerns which often reflect government priorities. While welcome in many respects this can lead to a regrettable narrowing of topics neglecting some challenges and opportunities.

The Research Mobilities project found that:

1. Teachers' encounters with literacy research mainly focused on a narrow range of topics which link to the current National Curriculum for English, especially aspects of reading such as phonics and reading for pleasure.
2. Research encountered on some topics, such as reading, originated from a relatively narrow range of sources, missing perspectives that could prove valuable to teachers, such as insights into children's perspectives on reading or literacy outside school.
3. Writing received far less attention than reading.
4. Topics which were notable by their absence included critical literacy, multimodality, digital media and multilingualism. These are all highly relevant to literacy in the contemporary context.



Findings: Research

Different kinds of research can inform educational policy and practice in different ways. It is helpful to approach a topic or priority by drawing on more than one study and on sources informed by different perspectives and methodologies. It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of individual studies.

The Research Mobilities project found that:

1. Research rarely appears to teachers in the form of 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 evaluate claims made by underpinning research.
2. Sometimes guidelines, resources, schemes and interventions are presented as 'research-informed' or 'evidence-based' but underpinning research is not possible to trace.
3. Research evidence is often 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, training session or research summary. Very little attention is paid to concepts or underpinning ideas.
4. Research evidence can become confused or diluted as it is broken down and presented in different forms and in different places. Sometimes it accumulates additional meanings, e.g. as it combines with other ideas or is interpreted in new ways.
5. Research evidence may be more likely to be adopted in policy and practice when it is encountered repeatedly in different places and/or when it resonates with existing beliefs. But frequency does not necessarily equate to high quality research.

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

Findings: Teachers

Encounters with research are most valuable to teachers when they have time and space to discuss findings with colleagues and interpret them with their own experience, concerns, context and students in mind.

The Research Mobilities project found that:

1. Teachers 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.
2. Some schools/trusts provide space and time for teacher enquiry and for professional dialogue about research. Others have limited opportunities.
3. Teachers have different priorities, interests and concerns when they engage with research. Some teachers do not want to or do not have capacity to engage with research due to other pressures.
4. Teachers can find it difficult to access research or to identify research that is relevant to their interests.
5. Teachers encounter research in a variety of different ways in physical and digital spaces. Some encounters happen in school while others happen via professional or support networks.
6. Teachers' encounters with research happen through a variety of channels including school and national policy, CPD, Masters courses, email alerts from organisations and social media as well as friends, family and colleagues.
7. Judgements about the credibility, expertise and legitimacy of research sources are difficult within this crowded landscape.
8. Teachers can find it hard to trace the methods underpinning research they encounter and when they can do so they can be difficult to understand due to technical terms.
9. All of the above can make it difficult for teachers to engage critically with research.



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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¹Chaudron, S., Di Gioia, R. & Gemo, M. (2018). Young Children (0–8) and Digital Technology: A Qualitative Study across Europe. European Commission, JRC. Luxembourg: Publication Office. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC110359> doi:10.2760/294383

²Marsh, 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

³Burnett, 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>

⁴For 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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BURNETT, Cathy <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6087-244X>>, ADAMS, Gill
<<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2088-8708>>, GILLEN, J., THOMPSON, T.L., ČERMÁKOVÁ,
A., SHANNON, David and SHETTY, Parinita

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