

Making connections between research and practice



Briefing for School/Trust Leaders

There is a vast range of research available that 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.

Introduction

This briefing was produced through a research project which explored teachers' encounters with literacy research. It will be of interest to schools and trusts that are interested in drawing on research to inform and/or inspire teaching. 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 the teaching role.

Research can:

- Model teaching approaches (e.g. by evaluating or analysing strategies, activities or interventions).**
- Provide insights to inform professional decision making (e.g. insights into children's experiences within or outside school or into how children learn or feel).**
- Provide inspiration for how to investigate children's experience (by using methods of data collection or analysis that could be used in teacher-led enquiry or reflective practice, e.g. artistic, creative or participatory approaches).**
- Advance critique to support re-evaluation of established policies or practices (e.g. about limitations of current curriculum, practices that disadvantage some children or the value of a resource/scheme).**
- Prompt imaginative leaps in considering what might be possible and/or desirable and/or how this might be achieved.**

Research can not only help to decide 'what (might) work' but address 'why', 'what else' 'so what'...and 'what if?' It can however be difficult to locate and evaluate different kinds of research and to make connections between research and practice that enhance professional decision making.

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 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. 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. 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

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...?’*



Recommendations for Trust Leaders

Providing time and space for school leaders and teachers to reflect on research, for example by:

Nurturing a trust culture in which schools feel free to explore alternative perspectives, even when championing one particular approach as guidance for practice.

Incorporating research into trust protocols for school improvement, monitoring and self-evaluation by providing research-focussed starting points for professional discussions with school leaders.

Establishing a climate in which schools are encouraged to draw on research to open out professional debate rather than to close it down.

Encourage leaders and teachers to engage with different kinds of research, for example by:

Sharing and promoting research across trust professional development events and associated groups.

Encouraging engagement with networks and professional/subject associations that facilitate engagement with a broad range of research.

Encourage critical engagement with research, for example by:

Encouraging school leaders in the trust to engage critically with evidence derived from diverse methodologies and ensure they are confident in doing so. For example, research reviews and summaries can be very useful but 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.

Supporting school leaders to make time for teachers to evaluate the credibility of the sources they encounter.

Encourage schools within the trust to engage with research, for example by:

Providing opportunities for school leaders to follow lines of enquiry that link to the concerns and interests of their specific contexts.

Drawing on research to inform trust policy and 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.

Encouraging school leaders to use research for a range of purposes to address current concerns and to open out new possibilities, for example to engage with research that explores 'why', 'what else' 'so what' and 'what if?'



Recommendations for School Leaders

Providing time and space for teachers to reflect on research, for example by:

Nurturing a culture in which teachers 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.

Encourage teachers to engage with different kinds of research, for example by:

Facilitating engagement with networks and professional/subject associations that promote engagement with a broad range of research, e.g. see Council for Subject Associations <https://www.subjectassociations.org.uk/>

Encourage critical engagement with research, for example by:

Encouraging teachers to engage critically with evidence derived from diverse methodologies and ensure they are confident in doing so. For example, research reviews and summaries can be very useful but 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.

Making time for teachers to evaluate the credibility of the sources they encounter.

Encourage teachers to engage with research for different purposes, for example by:

Providing opportunities for teachers to follow lines of investigation that link to their professional concerns and interests and engage in professional enquiry.

Drawing on research to inform school trust/policy and 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.

Encouraging teachers to use research for a range of purposes to address current concerns and to open out new possibilities, for example to engage with research that explores 'why', 'what else' 'so what' and '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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