

Engaging with Research



Briefing for Teachers

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 as a result of a research project which explored teachers' encounters with literacy research. It will be of interest to teachers who are interested in drawing on research 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 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 project highlighted a range of barriers and opportunities associated with teachers' engagement with research.

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 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.

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.

"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."

"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 connecting research to practice

1. Finding Research

Identify research which explores alternative perspectives and informs practice in different ways, e.g. that: models approaches to teaching and learning; supports critical evaluation of current practice; raises questions about learners' experiences; and/or supports imaginative and creative thinking about future possibilities.

2. Sharing Research

Create spaces to discuss research with colleagues face-to-face or using social media and/or engage with online networks and professional/subject associations that support discussion about a range of research.

3. Engaging with Research

Recognise that research findings may shift in meaning as they appear in different forms and evaluate the credibility of research findings and sources. Where possible, trace research findings to original reports/articles. When this is not possible, treat assertions with caution.

4. Responding to Research

Use research as the starting point for reflection and dialogue, e.g. following lines of enquiry that link to your professional concerns, context and interests, conducting investigations/teacher-led inquiries.

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 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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