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Engaging with research to inform policy and practice in literacy education: A discussion paper

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There is a vast range of literacy research that has relevance to literacy education. This discussion paper maps various ways in which literacy research can inform policy and practice and raises important questions to address in strengthening relationships between literacy research and education.

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. Meaning making reflects diverse social, cultural and technological imperatives and everyday life requires an expanding communicative repertoire. In the light of this, literacy research has an important role to play in shaping educational policy and practice.

The interdisciplinary field of literacy research encompasses work from psychology, sociology, philosophy and neuroscience as well as media, literary and literacy studies. Methodologies include many different qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. 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.

Given this range and diversity, an inclusive approach to literacy research when shaping policy and practice. Otherwise alternative and/or complementary ways of supporting literacy learning may be missed as will important possibilities for literacy education and children's current and future lives.

The range of literacy research includes[1]:

- Research which addresses a wide range of topics that feature in literacy curricula in various parts of the world, such as reading proficiency, reading comprehension, writing composition, transcription skills, critical literacy, multilingualism, multimodality, digital media, talk, creativity and design.
- Research which explores social, cultural, material, affective cognitive and/or environmental aspects of literacy within and beyond school.
- Research using a range of methodologies that include large scale trials, mixed methods studies and detailed explorations of the experiences of individual children or classrooms.
- Research which explores literacy as currently conceived within the literacy curriculum as well as research exploring ways of addressing more expansive views of literacy.

Questions for discussion

What do we mean by literacy? *How can we define literacy in ways that are relevant to children's lives now and in the future?*

The task of devising inclusive and empowering educational provision for literacy is a complex one, not least in primary schools which are often viewed as the preparation ground for learning across the curriculum. In deciding how literacy should be taught and what should be prioritised, it is important to recognise that literacy does not stand still[2]. The literacy demands of life today are very different to those of the last century, not least due to changes in digital technologies. These will continue to change with the growth in use of generative AI.

What is literacy education for? *What kinds of readers or writers could/should children be and how does this articulate with social, cultural, economic and civic concerns and priorities?*

Most would agree than a key function of literacy education is to ensure that children are confident in interpreting and creating a wide range of texts for multiple audiences and for a range of purposes. Given that literacy is central to so much that we do, it is important not to see literacy simply as a set of teachable skills. Literacy is inextricable from children's personal, social, cultural,

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[1] See Burnett, C. (2022). *Scoping the field of literacy research: how might a range of research be valuable to primary teachers?* (Working paper.) http://doi.org/10.7190/shu-working-papers/2201
2 Merchant G. *Why Writing Still Matters: Written Communication in Changing Times*. Cambridge University Press; 2023.

economic and civic lives. Literacy education can challenge inequalities to enhance inclusivity and empowerment[3].

How best to support literacy learning? *What is needed to address a breadth of ambition linked to: what literacy is and what literacy education is for?*

Many recent debates about literacy learning (and specifically the teaching of early reading) have focused on the 'best' way to teach. Alternative perspectives have been presented as competing positions rather than as offering complementary insights. Failure to recognise the contribution of work across the diverse field of literacy scholarship may have detrimental effects on children's literacy learning. Studies of successful literacy teachers have found that they draw on a repertoire of approaches to respond to the needs of different learners[4].

Why draw on a range of research to inform our responses to these questions?

Drawing on a diversity of research can offer rich potential for creative policy making and enriching professional repertoires.

Burnett (2022)'s survey of research relevant to literacy education in primary schools examined 142 articles published in 11 journals between 2019 and 2021. These were categorised in relation to 8 orientations, each reflecting different assumptions about the nature and/or purpose of literacy learning.

The survey highlighted a vast range of ways in which research might inform or inspire creative and imaginative thinking about plans and possibilities for literacy education through:

- illuminating the experiences of teachers, learners and/or learning processes ('insights');
- questioning assumptions about the aims, purposes and effects of literacy in schools ('critiques');
- evaluating/analysing approaches to teaching and learning literacy ('responses').

Some implications of the research identified are listed in the Appendix.

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[3] Kamler B., Comber B. (2005).Turn-around pedagogies: improving the education of at-risk students. *Improving Schools*, 8(2): 121-131.

[4] For example, see:

Hall K. (2013). Effective literacy teaching in the early years of school: A review of evidence. In J. Larson J. Marsh, J. (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy, 2nd edn*. London: Sage.

Purcell-Gates V., Duke N., Stouffer J. (2016). Teaching literacy: Reading. In D. H. Gitomer, C. A. Bell (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (5th ed., pp. 1217–1267). American Educational Research Association.

Engaging with a range of research involves recognising that different methodologies can produce complementary or alternative insights. Small scale, qualitative studies for example may provide insights into the diversity of children's experience which challenge established approaches to literacy education. Research into different topics can usefully extend ideas about what literacy education might- and should- be for. Different kinds of research are therefore needed to explore the complex relationships and experiences that frame literacy learning and curricula.
research for

See appendix for Implications of literacy research for literacy education (see Burnett, 2022).

How can we draw on a range of research when developing policy and practice questions?

How do we create an environment where alternative perspectives are heard and where complexity and contradiction are seen as the basis for creative policy and practice?

Attending to multiple forms of research is not straightforward. Researchers have differential access to funding to support dissemination and policy makers, teachers and schools face barriers when accessing and navigating research. Some research findings align easily with current policy or practice whereas others are out of step with dominant discourses. Some research may be poorly designed, executed or communicated and different criteria are needed to evaluate the worth of different kinds of research.

Addressing these challenges requires a policy context that recognises the contribution of research from different paradigms and encourages teacher agency in drawing on research to enhance professional thinking.

Recommendations

For policy makers this might be achieved in these ways:

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;

- engaging 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.

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.

For schools/trusts/teachers this might be achieved in this way:

Encourage leaders and teachers to engage with different kinds of research through:

- Sharing, promoting and engaging with a range of research across trust/school professional development events and associated groups.
- Engaging with networks and professional/subject associations that facilitate engagement with a broad range of research.

For researchers/research organisations this might be achieved in this way:

Nurture opportunities to reflect on research findings from projects underpinned by diverse perspectives and methodologies through:

- Planning for collaborative, interdisciplinary work across research centres and institutions.
- Valuing and developing impact strategies that build on collaborative work across institutions as well as with stakeholders including policy makers, teachers, school/trust leaders.

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Further information on the methodology for the scoping review and the range of research surveyed can be found in:

Burnett, C. (2022). *Scoping the field of literacy research: how might a range of research be valuable to primary teachers?* (Working paper.) **http://doi.org/10.7190/shu-working-papers/2201**

Further information about the *Research Mobilities in Primary Literacy Education* project and related publications/resources can be found at
Research Mobilities in Primary Literacy Education (shu.ac.uk)

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Orientations to Literacy / Scoping the Field

Venn diagram orientations (top to bottom):
- Across the curriculum
- Multidimensional
- Material and embodied
- Social
- Power
- Meaning making
- Socially situated practices
- A set of skills
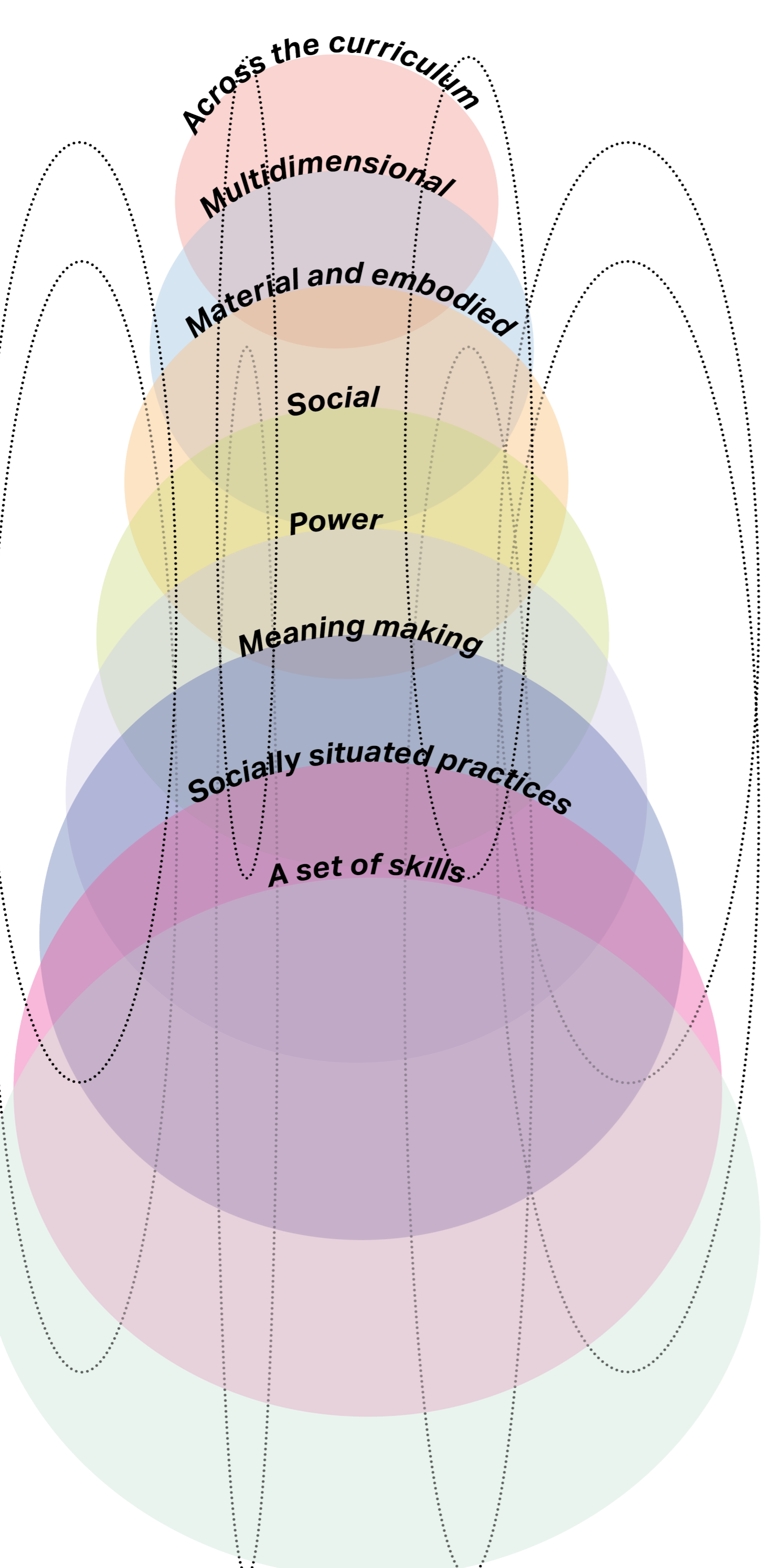
Implications arising from scoped orientations

Insights

1. Literacy acquisition X
2. The reading process X
3. Qualities of children's writing at different ages X
4. Relationships between comprehension and factors such as background knowledge; choosing to read; working memory; task and text X
5. Children's experiences, strengths & identities as meaning makers, including the role of families, out of school writing practices and peer interactions X
6. The role of translanguaging, multilingualism, transnationalism and digital media in young children's literacies X
7. Volitional writing X
8. Relationships between text characteristics, gender and motivation X
9. Reading motivation: as predictor of reading success; as culturally specific X
10. Children's writing on screen X
11. Subject knowledge for teachers of writing as craft knowledge X
12. Children as reflexive autonomous writers X
13. Children as motivated and accomplished composers of digital media outside school X
14. Creative design & transmediations of content in children's use of virtual reality X
15. Experiences of translingual refugee children X
16. Children's creativity and competence in multimodal sign making X
17. Nature of talk around shared reading (including ebooks, picturebooks) X
18. Role of gesture in early writing X
19. Peer scaffolding in literacy games X
20. Role of affect in classroom activity X
21. Literacy as relational rather than individual X
22. Writing as emergent rather than planned X
23. The role of online story exchanges in transnational partnership in fostering relational ties X
24. Low quality of apps for early writing X
25. Significance of emotional charge to text comprehension X
26. Relationships between reading and emotional wellbeing X
27. Relationships between cross linguistic skills, societal/contextual factors, and prior learner experiences in word reading X

Critiques

1. Expansions of Simple View of Reading X
2. Children's perspectives on phonics screening check & its effects on curriculum X
3. Linguistic errors in phonics schemes X
4. Critique of summer reading loss research X
5. Inequity of classroom opportunity/analysis of appropriateness of schooling/resources for children's needs X
6. Inappropriateness of monoglossic literacy assessments for bilingual children X X
7. Challenge to discourse of boys as reluctant readers X
8. Construction of inequities/illiterate identities X
9. Constraining effects of literacy policy X
10. Racialising pedagogies and practices X
11. Relationship between teacher talk and child talk X
12. Challenging notions of literacy as design X

Responses

1. Use of apps/programs to support literacy skills/ vocabulary devt X
2. Effects of: phonics teaching; morphological instruction text structure instruction on reading and writing informational text X
3. Effects on comprehension of: interactive shared reading intervention; content rich X
4. English Arts curriculum; teacher questioning; teaching metacognition X
5. Instruction for children with dyslexia X
6. Interventions for 'struggling readers' X
7. Culturally responsive teaching e.g. through story circles, digital media, digital storytelling, writers workshops; play X
8. Adaptations of approaches such as Reading Recovery X
9. Measures for assessment of early vocabulary development X
10. Poetry writing: defamiliarisation as a tool to support creativity, engagement, writing for aesthetic experience; dance and visual arts for poetry writing X
11. Developing teachers as writers, teachers' identities as writers, writers as artist-educators X
12. Picture books for developing verbal and communication skills with autistic learners X
13. Use of dual language books with multilingual children X
14. Writing workshop using picturebooks with bilingual children X
15. Effects of: readers theatre on boys' reading engagement; task model enhancement on reading for purpose; contextualised teaching of grammar & mentor texts on writing X
16. Principles for selection of digital resources X
17. Developing critical, humanising pedagogies X
18. Seeking out strength-based representations of children X
19. Foregrounding 'hidden' children's authors X
20. Challenging scripts for classroom success/failure from an Afrocentric stance X
21. Disrupting colonised curriculum; teaching meanings and things around them X
22. Interrogating relationships between children, meanings and things around them X
23. Fostering literacies as world making, world changing activities X
24. Opportunities for critical literacy/civic action X
25. Effects of literacy coaching X
26. Co-composing, writers workshop, choice & agency X
27. Role of teacher/other adults in facilitating talk, e.g. linked to translingual practices X
28. Decentring the teacher, e.g. reconfiguring familiar pedagogies, such as writers' workshop to be more child led X
29. Developing generative pedagogies, e.g. drama and reading, play and writing X
30. Encouraging use of context and phonics in word solving in reading X
31. Classification scheme for identifying children's mathematical writing X
32. Developing argumentative agency and critical argumentative literacy in history X

Key to Orientations & Number of Articles Sourced

- **02** Literacy and learning across the curriculum
- **06** Literacy learning as multidimensional
- **09** Literacy as material and embodied practices
- **10** Literacy as social
- **15** Literacy and power
- **20** Literacy as meaning making
- **25** Literacy as socially situated practices
- **55** Literacy as a set of skills