

Research Mobilities in Education

Gill Adams^{1,2}, Cathy Burnett^{1,2}, Petra Vackova², Julia Gillen³, Terrie-Lynn Thompson⁴
Cermakova, Anna³

1st choice network: [Professional learning and development](#)

Keywords: research mobilities, digital technologies, literacy

Abstract

As debates continue about how teachers might use research, ‘evidence-informed’ teaching is increasingly a focus of attention in international contexts, encouraged in Europe through the European Council. In England this work is accelerating compared to other European countries (Pellegrini & Vivanet 2021) with ‘evidence-informed’ teaching embedded within professional frameworks, including the early career framework designed to support teacher professional development (DFE 2019). However, while use of research to inform teaching appears to be increasing, patterns of use are uneven, conceptualisations of research within such frameworks are limited and little is known about how teachers encounter research. In addressing this problem through a focus on primary school literacy, this paper shares new understandings of what we term research mobilities to gain insights into how research moves to and between teachers and what stops it from doing so.

A growing literature on research mobilisation highlights the complexities associated with research dissemination, use and interpretation within education (eg., Cain 2015; Cain et al. 2019; Maxwell, et al. 2019; Meusberger 2017; Whitty et al. 2016). However very little attention has been paid to how educational research moves ‘in the wild’ through complex and intersecting networks generated by communications, digital technologies and a shifting landscape for professional learning. In this paper we explore what happens to educational research evidence as it moves (or not) to teachers. We attend particularly to those movements that are unplanned or unforeseen by researchers – for example as evidence is promoted, critiqued and/or re-framed on social media channels or through policy documents and research dissemination platforms. We draw on the initial findings of an ESRC funded research project in which we track the movements of research findings linked to literacy education to and among primary teachers and argue that interdisciplinary methods are needed if we are to fully understand the range of actors that combine to produce the movements of research.

Where movements of educational research have been studied (Neal et al. 2015), no distinction has been made between the movements of different kinds of research (eg., that differ in methodology or topic). Understanding such movements matters as, if certain kinds of research evidence gain disproportionate influence or are made less visible, and/or if findings become distorted or overgeneralised as they are mediated in different ways, this will have a significant – if indirect – impact on children’s learning. Moreover, while prior research has explored how individuals and organisations broker research (Knight & Lyall 2013, Nutley & Walter 2007), there is little in-depth knowledge of how digital technologies are changing teachers’ encounters with research, for example, how algorithms, AI, machine learning, or hashtags on social media and recommender systems shape interactions between teachers and research. In an increasingly digitised environment for professional learning, these insights are needed (Thompson 2018) particularly as digital actors continue to combine in unexpected and unanticipated ways by those who design and use these digital systems (Hansen

¹ Presenting author

² Sheffield Hallam University

³ Lancaster University

⁴ University of Stirling

2015). To investigate the complex actors and the relations between them that propel (or block) movements of research evidence, we adopt a sociomaterial approach that foregrounds the role of human and digital actors in mobilising research evidence (Adams & Thompson 2016, Burnett & Merchant 2020, Thompson & Adams 2020). Employing such heuristics, we will begin to examine, in this paper, how different actors combine in dynamic and often unexpected ways to generate appearances, disappearances and/or reworkings of research evidence. Our paper will therefore also offer a discussion on new theoretical and methodological resources for understanding the movements of research across education and other social sciences.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

The study we are drawing on here employs a flexible and innovative multi-method approach incorporating ethnographic and digital research methods to gain different vantage points on research movements, combining attention to movements of research in primary literacy education at macro level with fine-grained analysis of individual teachers' experiences and the translations of specific pieces of research. In this paper we will engage with and discuss qualitative data from one strand of the project, namely a data set co-produced with teachers that illuminates the scope, nature and mediation of teachers' encounters with research in primary literacy education within varying personal and school contexts. In our investigations of teachers' encounters with research in primary literacy education, we work with teachers to develop an adaptation of 'lifelogging' to record creatively their everyday encounters with research, and we invite them to share reflections on their experiences in focus groups and individual interviews. Participants produce visual representations of their experience (Salmons 2014) and discuss their approach to lifelogging with other participants and the researchers during focus groups to promote a deeper level of reflection. Interview and focus group data are analysed thematically, generating an in-depth analysis of common themes and variation in teachers' lived experiences of encounters with research and the influence of context on those encounters. This qualitative strand of our project then produces rich and entangled short narratives and stories that attend to specific encounters among teachers and research through a collage of textual and visual reflections.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

Through exploring the movement of research evidence in primary literacy education we contribute to understanding of 'research mobilities'. A new approach to theorisation of research mobilities is required to understand any patterns in the kinds of research that moves to teachers; to understand how it moves; and to trace what happens to the meaning of research as it moves. Our paper therefore supports a critical understanding of research mobilisation that goes beyond notions of dissemination and knowledge exchange to foreground the complexity of research movements. This theorisation of research mobilities will have implications for international researchers interested in research mobilisation/knowledge exchange across education.

References

- Adams, C., Thompson, T. L. (2016). *Researching a posthuman world: Interviews with digital objects*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burnett, C., Merchant, G. (2020). *Undoing the digital: Sociomaterialism and literacy*. London: Routledge.
- Cain, T. (2015). Teachers' engagement with research texts: Beyond instrumental, conceptual or strategic use. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 41(5), 478–492.
- Cain, T., Brindley, S., Brown, C. Jones, G., Rigab, F (2019). Bounded decision-making, teachers' reflection and organisational learning: How research can inform teachers and teaching. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(5), 1072-1087.

- Department for Education (DFE) (2019). Early career framework. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-career-framework>
- Hansen, M.B.N. (2015). *Feedforward: On the future of twenty-first-century media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Knight, C., Lyall, C. (2013). Knowledge brokers: The role of intermediaries in producing research impact. *Evidence & Policy*, 9(3), 309-316.
- Maxwell, B., Coldwell, M., Willis, B., Culliney, M. (2019). Teaching assistants regional scale-up campaigns: Lessons learned. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Campaigns/TA_scale_up_lessons_learned.pdf
- Meusberger, P. (2017). Spatial mobility of knowledge: Communicating different categories of knowledge. In J. Heike, P., Meusberger, M. Heffernan (Eds.), *Mobilities of Knowledge*. Singapore: Springer.
- Neal, J., Neal, Z. P., Kornbluh, M., Mills, K.J., Lawlor, J. A. (2015). Brokering the research-practice gap: A typology. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 56(3-4), 422-435.
- Nutley, & Walter, I. (2007). *Using evidence How research can inform public services*. Bristol University Press.
- Pellegrini, M., & Vivianet, G. (2021). Evidence-Based Policies in Education: Initiatives and Challenges in Europe. *ECNU Review of Education*, 4(1), 25-45. <https://10.1177/2096531120924670>
- Salmons, J. (2014). *Visual methods in online interviews*. London: Sage.
- Thompson, T. L. (2018). The making of mobilities in online work-learning practices. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1031-1046.
- Thompson, T. L., & Adams, C. (2020). Accountabilities of posthuman research. *Explorations in Media Ecology*, 19(3), 337-349.
- Whitty, G., Andres, J., Hayton, A., Tang, S., Wisby, E. (2016). *Research and policy in education: Evidence, ideology and impact*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.