Investigating Relationships Between Literacy Research, Policy, and Practice: A Critical Review of Related Literature

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Abstract

This paper is driven by concern that the fields of literacy research, policy and practice do not interact with one another in ways that are congruent or productive, as evidenced in recent government literacy reports in Australia and overseas. This concern leads us to interrogate the nature of the relationship between literacy research, policy development and classroom practice. With a view to understanding how this relationship might be enhanced, this paper provides a literature review of the nexus between literacy research, policy and practice, the issues that arise therein, and directions for further investigation, including our ARC Discovery 'Nexus Project' (Harris, Derewianka, Chen, Fitzsimmons, Kervin, Turbill, Cruickshank, McKenzie & Konza, 2007).

Introduction

Amidst literacy inquiries and proposed reforms in Australia and overseas, the nexus between literacy research, policy and practice remains a vexed issue (Dudley-Marling, 2005**)**. While recent reports commissioned by the Australian Government (eg *Teaching Reading*, 2005; *Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula*, 2005) and overseas (*No Child Left Behind*, United States Congress, 2002) have attempted to establish priorities for literacy teaching and research, the recommendations address only limited aspects of literacy education (Derewianka 2006) and do not provide a sufficiently comprehensive basis for policy development. There appears to be little agreement among literacy educators as to research priorities in the field. Yet, as governments and bureaucracies continue to focus on 'quality teaching' and the professional knowledge teachers need in order to operationalise this, there is

a need to explore the implications of literacy research and policy upon classroom practice. In this context, it is not surprising that there appears to be little alignment between most research being conducted in Australia, the policies being proposed by the government, and what happens in the classroom.

From this lack of alignment a number of concerns arise in terms of identifying research issues perceived as having high priority in the profession. There seems to be no explicit research agenda on the part of the education systems and no transparent system of funding or tendering. Academic literacy researchers express discouragement from their sense of bureaucratic obstructionism and lack of direction.

As for teachers, they appear to feel marginalised and disenchanted by top-down imposition of research findings. As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) state, "the field of curriculum is – to put it bluntly – a maze" (p. 113). The imperative for teachers finding their way through this maze is heightened by the current climate of accountability, outcomes-based education and standardisation in assessment. Concerns such as these lead us to critically examine the relationship between literacy research, policy and practice. This paper does so through a review of related literature. Below, the framework for this paper is set out, followed by discussions of research, policy and practice. This review identifies issues and directions for further investigation, including our ARC Discovery 'Nexus Project' (Harris, Derewianka, Chen, Fitzsimmons, Kervin, Turbill, Cruickshank, McKenzie & Konza, 2007).

Conceptual Framework

Bernstein's (1990) concept of the pedagogic device provides a useful framework with which to examine the nexus between research, policy and practice. This concept describes the ensemble of rules or procedures by which knowledge generated in the research field is transformed into various forms of pedagogic discourse (e.g. policy, curricula and classroom talk) across different contexts by different groups and individuals. The processes of pedagogising knowledge are described as occurring in three hierarchically related fields, namely fields of production (research), recontextualisation (policy), and reproduction (practice). This pedagogic device thus offers a powerful tool for analysing the complex interaction occurring in the three fields this project has identified: the field of literacy research where specialised knowledge is generated, field of policy making where the specialised

knowledge is converted into official pedagogic discourse, and field of practice where privileged and privileging pedagogic discourse is translated into classroom practice. The study of the complex interactions between these fields help identify the influential players in shaping various forms pedagogic discourses in the field of literacy education.

This framework is useful for locating individuals in terms of the three fields of literacy research, policy and practice that they occupy, understanding their position and place in these fields, and exploring their perspectives in terms of the fields they do and do not occupy. For Bernstein (1990), agencies and organizations constitute the fields of the pedagogic device. Agents of each field struggle for resources and control over the rules for constructing pedagogic practice. In so doing, they take up different positions, some dominating, others dominated; and what and whose agendas prevail represent ongoing concerns. Debates over direct instruction versus constructivist approaches to literacy pedagogy, as evidenced in the recent *Teaching Reading* Report (Rowe, 2005), is an example of the struggles over the pedagogic device regulating the production and distribution of legitimate pedagogic models.

There are three caveats that we make to Bernstein's framework. The first is, where Bernstein locates recontextualisation of knowledge in the field of policy making, we acknowledge that recontextualisation occurs in all three fields – such as when researchers review research studies in a new context of inquiry, or when schools recast national or systemic policy in view of their own particular contexts. Each process of recontextualisation, according to Singh (2002), creates space for changes in power and control and thereby a change in ideological meaning. The concept of recontextualisation is thus critical to understanding questions of 'what', 'who' and 'how' that underline the pedagogising of knowledge in the field of literacy education.

Our second caveat is that we do not perceive the interactions between research, policy and teaching to be strictly linear. Rather, we conceive of a nexus where connections among literacy research, policy and practice occur in various permutations and to varying degrees of interactivity and congruence. In cell biology, nexus is defined as an area of the cellular membrane that helps cells communicate or adhere. This definition resonates with the area of our concern, in terms of how literacy research, policy and practice connect and communicate (if indeed they do), and how the nexus formed by these three fields might be strengthened.

Our third caveat is that we do not assume that practice is necessarily, ideally or wholly determined by research or policy. Many diverse factors mediate individuals' uptake and appropriations of research and policy. In the field of practice, individuals may adopt proactive or reactive stances, and engage in practices ranging from replication to interrogation and innovation. Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995; 2000) assists understanding of how teachers make sense of their organisational environments. According to Sense-making theory (Weick, 1995, 2000) individuals make interpretations that are embedded in social interaction and negotiation. Sensemaking theory provides a means for investigating the processes by which people, both as individuals and as members of a group assign order to their everyday events and activities (Cecz-Kecmanovic, 2004; Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke & Lui, 2005). These interpretations are deeply embedded in individuals' workplace and organisational settings (Coburn, 2001, 2004). These culturally created settings in turn reflect the joint understandings, organisational procedures and routines that created them (Coburn, 2004). Individuals and groups within these settings are constantly in flux as they react to and interpret new messages from the environment, modifying and adjusting their previous worldviews and beliefs and influencing or supporting the prevailing culture (Weick, 1995; Mills, 2003; Coburn, 2004).

Making sense of research, policy and practice is subject to many influences that converge in an individual's setting. Teachers and schools, for example, continue to confront myriad and often conflicting sources of information arising from research and policy as well as professional development, coursework at university, teacher networks, collegial conversations, and the like (Coburn, 2001). As Sensemaking concerns understanding how organisational cultures and their supporting social structures evolve over time (Coburn, 2004), it is essentially an exercise in intertextuality (as defined by Kristeva, 1984), in which individuals draw links with the texts of their lives (Harris & McKenzie, 2005). These texts-of-life comprise an evolving archive of what individuals have read, viewed, heard and lived. In organisational settings, such as schools, individuals' texts-of-life intersect and encounter other influences beyond their setting. Of interest in these intersections are who and what are brought together and in what kinds of relationships; and what is maintained, transformed, added and omitted in the passage across literacy research, policy and practice, and through what means. Meaning attached to perceived events, experiences and perceptions in and across the fields of research, policy and practice may be understood by the 'speech acts of actors in a field' (Foucault, 1972, p. 122).

Exploring these relationships invokes intertextuality theory (Kristeva, 1984) to further understand the nexus of literacy research, policy and practice. Concerned with the juxtaposition of texts, one is never just reading the text-in-hand (e.g., a policy document or a reading report). Each text is produced against the background of a vast network of texts on which it explicitly and implicitly draws, with the reader tapping into some, all or none of this network while bringing their own background to bear on interpretation (Barthes, 1988). Examining connections that are made, foregrounded and marginalized contributes to understanding ideological framing and indeed jostling in a field (Oliver & Johnson, 2000; Snow, 2004).

With these caveats made to Bernstein's pedagogic device, we now examine each of the fields that make up this device. We begin with the field of research.

Exploring the Nexus in Relation to the Field of Literacy Research

Literacy research is a field in which knowledge about literacy learning and teaching is generated (Bernstein, 1990). The research field is not the sole domain of designated 'researchers' *per se*. For example, teachers in the field of practice may at the same time subject their own work to research scrutiny and may do so in the context of policy mandates – thereby shuttling across two or all three fields of literacy research, policy and practice.

Each researcher interprets the field of literacy research through the lens of the particular paradigms and knowledge base that frame their work. Research is based on a network of epistemological and ontological convictions, and researchers constitute multiple interpretive communities, each with its own criteria for evaluating interpretations that are made (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In the process of evaluating interpretations, space for recontextualisation of research by policy developers is created (Bernstein, 1990) – so, too, is such space created by researchers themselves, drawing on their own ideological frames to interpret research done within a similar or different frame. This process is inherently intertextual in nature, as researchers explicitly and implicitly draw links to others' research (Bloome, 2001) and corral those works that best help researchers make their case and inform their work. This exercise is

not neutral; and the field of literacy research inevitably sees its participants jostling for positions of greater dominance, while others occupy less dominant places.

While the connectedness among the three fields of research, policy and practice is our focus, it cannot be assumed there is coherence within these fields. Research is a field that is characterised by diverse approaches and paradigms, which has much potential for dialogue, provocative discussion and rich insights from multiple perspectives. However, at times, such potential is diminished by polarisations that are aligned with competition for voice and research support. Indeed Snow and Benford (2000) and Snow (2004) believe that there is always a hegemony within disparate but still connected disciplines producing what they refer to as master frames of discourse that appear to weaken the overall potency and focus of collective possibilities and connections that could be derived.

A notable example of struggle for position in the literacy research field revolves around Australia's recent *Teaching Reading* Report (Rowe, 2005) and its US 2002 counterpart, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) (United States Congress, 2002). These reports have re-fuelled debate and polarisation in the research field. Throughout the *Teaching Reading* Report, 'evidence-based' research is the only approach accorded validity, just as the NCLB only recognizes 'scientific' research. The definition of 'evidence-based' research in *Teaching Reading* emphasizes 'systematic, empirical methods' relying on 'sound measurement' and involving 'rigorous data analyses and statistical modelling of data' which are 'subject to expert scientific review' (Rowe, 2005, p. 85). The Report has an explicit bias towards experimental and clinical research of the type conducted by phonics researchers. The proposed project acknowledges the importance of 'rigour', 'clarity', 'specificity' and 'validity' in literacy research and recognizes that an experimental approach has a role to play, particularly at the level of phonics. However, by restricting literacy research to a narrow definition of 'evidence-based', the Report is excluding other research approaches that literacy researchers use and which are also needed for the Report's recommendations to be realised and enacted.

The *Teaching Reading* Report's (Rowe, 2005) definition of research aligns itself with recent national reports (de Lemos, 2002; Ellis, 2005) which adopt, by their own admission, a narrow approach to literacy, prioritising (a) reading at the expense of the relationship between reading and writing, (b) beginning reading at the expense of literacy development throughout the school years, (c) decoding skills at the expense of a more complex and comprehensive view

of literacy, and (d) students with decoding difficulties at the expense of students with no such problems (Turbill, 2006). Such approaches to defining literacy research polarize the profession and alienate teachers from research (Mills, 2005), and polarise the general population into camps that negates current research. The extent to which the approach taken in these reports reflect the 'state of play' in literacy research continues to be brought into serious question (Pearson, 2003), an issue that can and does lead to some research frames of understanding assuming an undeserved importance over others (Snow and Benford, 2000).

Clearly, oppositional definitions challenge and divide researchers who work in other paradigms of research or who work across borders and blend approaches, as evident in literacy research journals (Harris, 2006a). A divided field cannot effectively inform and interact with policy and practice. If policy is not grounded in relevant, appropriate research, as policy itself proclaims it needs to be, then it stands to reason that practice too will fall short. While this does not preclude active and ongoing debate and comparative research, it is essential that optimal and rigorous research in tandem with all stakeholders form the platform for literacy praxis in Australia.

To move forward and articulate research with policy and practice in ways that are inclusive and productive, a number of implications are indicated, which we are now pursuing in our project. There is a need to:

- Examine the consequences for policy and practice of characterising research in terms of discrete and competing entities.
- Acknowledge alternative approaches, such as conceptualising research as continua of approaches. Indeed, broadened understandings of the nature of literacy research may be thought of as a constructive dialogue between qualitative and quantitative, hermeneutic and positivist paradigms (Ladwig, 1996) that is grounded in theory and which draws on a range of statistical, demographic, economic, sociological, ethnographic and psychometric data sources associated with different research paradigms (Luke, 2003b).
- Examine how such conceptualisations might provide a more inclusive nexus of research, policy and practice that is needed in these increasingly complex times.

- Appraise research approaches in terms of sense of 'fitness' for the research needs of researchers, practitioners and policy makers, and in terms of clarification of literacy research priorities from the perspectives of participants in all three fields who have a stake in the nexus between literacy research, policy and practice.

Exploring the Nexus in Relation to the Field of Literacy Policy Development

Policy development has been described as a field of recontextualisation of knowledge that is generated by research (Bernstein, 1990). Factors that shape recontextualisation include how policy developers interpret research, and do so against the backdrop of their own pre-conceptions, beliefs and agendas. Recontextualisation creates space for ideology to come into play, according to Bourdieu (Swartz, 1997). Gate-keeping constraints thus can and do apply to what research and related perspectives are admitted into policy development and which are not (Allington, 2002).

The two key reports on which proposed government policy is premised are *Teaching Reading* (Rowe 2005) and *Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula* (Donnelly 2005). The brief of the National Inquiry into Literacy, on which the *Teaching Reading* Report is based, was narrowed from a comprehensive inquiry into school literacy to the needs of children with decoding problems in the early years, which is not broad enough a basis for a literacy policy for all students. The Inquiry canvassed input by open invitation to all in the community. By Inquiry's end, 453 submissions were made from wide ranging parties including teachers and researchers with divergent perspectives. In the final report, there is little evidence that this variety of perspectives was taken into account, just as the Report's Literature Review restricted itself to a narrow range of 'evidence-based' research. Further, a careful analysis of the Donnelly Report reveals flaws in its selection of data sources, its analysis, and its conclusions (Derewianka, in press). Thus the relationship between these reports and literacy research is problematic, as is the relationship between these reports and proposed policy changes that, if enacted, could be deleterious for literacy education.

In light of this discussion, the work of policy developers would be greatly assisted by ascertaining the perceived priorities of systems and schools and by building such priorities into a national literacy research agenda that is based on democratic processes rather than dictated by those with a limited understanding of the breadth and complexity of literacy

education. Employer groups and policy developers at local, state and national levels need to be included as key informants and participants, to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive data base for examining the nexus of literacy research, policy and practice. These various parties have a critical role in mediating the relationship between research and teaching. How these individuals and groups perceive and conduct that role needs to be documented, as does the recontextualisation of research in policy statements and literacy reports. Such documentation and analysis are necessary to understanding the nature of the nexus between literacy research, policy and practice; and enhancing the quality of the interactions among the three fields.

Exploring the Nexus in Relation to the Field of Literacy Practice

Literacy teaching is a field in which teachers' interpretation and enactment of literacy research and policy are mediated by myriad factors, including children's needs, backgrounds and interests; resources and personnel support; levels of experience; teaching beliefs, values and philosophies; organisational priorities; situational enablers and constraints; policy mandates (Anstey & Bull, 2003; Coburn, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Harris, 2006a, 2006b). These factors provide filters through which teachers take up and appropriate research and policy. Cumming (2002) identified that tensions exist between theory and practice and suggested that teachers were "living these out in everyday learning environments" as a "creative tension" (p. 5). Locus of authority is a key factor. While some teachers use their own knowledge, beliefs and practices to interrogate and innovate upon research and policy, others invest authority in external sources such as research and policy *per se*, and replicate recommendations and mandates accordingly. Examination of the literature reveals that the 'craft' of teaching is something that is gradually acquired, 'trial and error' is necessary and as such teachers need to be supported in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Huberman, 1992; Kervin & Turbill, 2003). In examining teachers' perceptions of literacy research and policy, attention needs to be given to how teachers make sense of research and policy and how their interpretations are mediated and translated in their educational settings.

Giving voice to teachers is critical to strengthening the nexus of literacy research, policy and practice. It is well documented that teachers' concerns are not necessarily researchers' concerns (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001); research often fails to acknowledge teachers' tacit knowledge (Gitlin *et al*. 1992); and teachers can and do adopt a sceptical stance towards

policy (Harris, 2006b). It is vital that teachers critically analyse and reflect upon their action and what informs this (Kervin & Turbill, 2003). Further, it is well documented that no reading research has uncovered pedagogies that work for all students (Allington & Johnston, 2001). The relationship between educational research and classroom practice is complex, and one in which teachers' professional judgment is critical (Pearson, 2003). Unless their voice is heard and acknowledged as valid, as Butler (1997) suggests occurs in the power struggles that underpin paradigm shifts, social debates and all forms of social change, they may radically reconsider what they think is important and how they think about it.

While polarisation of perspectives on how to teach literacy recurs in research reports and policy documents, teachers appear not to share a major concern with such dichotomies and do not engage with binary oppositions that have resurfaced in recent times in national reports (Broadley *et al,* 2000; Harris, 2006b; Johnson, 2002). At the chalkface, teachers are concerned with catering to the individual and diverse needs of students, and most commonly use an eclectic range of teaching approaches and materials (Anstey & Bull, 2003). Whitehead (2000) argues that teachers draw upon their personal learning experiences when teaching, particularly if they do not understand the theory behind the teaching practice. Eclecticism is not without its problems, however, and there is a need for the rigorous development of principled repertoires of practices, grounded in research, that allow teachers to choose and adapt teaching strategies according to learners' needs and contexts; provide teachers with a wide repertoire of teaching and diagnostic assessment strategies; and enable teachers to clearly articulate the theoretical underpinnings of their teaching pedagogy for the students in their care, based on the data they have collected on such children's literacy development (Luke, 2003a; Turbill, 2006).

How such development might occur through the links between literacy research, policy and practice warrants investigation. Teachers' research needs require careful documentation, along with the kinds of research and forms of research reporting that teachers find accessible and useful. What teachers access in addition to or instead of research also is of interest, as is the recontextualisation of both research and policy in teachers' classroom practices.

Research Implications – the Nexus Project

The foregoing literature review includes several explicit research implications. Further, it brings to light the need for a forum for coordinating a collaborative response by key stakeholders to the development of a national research agenda in literacy education that identifies priority areas and questions, research approaches, and means for dissemination of research findings amongst researchers, policy developers and teachers alike. On behalf of and in conversation with literacy teachers, researchers and policy developers, we are launching a nationwide investigation of these perspectives in order to elucidate relationships among literacy research, policy and practice, and to explore how these relationships might be strengthened, funded by the Australian Research Council (Harris *et al*, 2007)

This investigation of relationships among literacy research, policy and practice is informed by the earlier conceptual framework and the research team's pilot of the Nexus Project (Harris, Derewianka, Turbill, Cambourne, Cruickshank, Fitzsimmons, McKenzie & Kervin, 2003). This next phase in our Nexus Project will be conducted in relation to prior-to-school, primary school and secondary school settings. It will examine perspectives across local, state and national levels, exploring viewpoints of literacy teachers, policy developers, researchers, and providers of teacher education and professional development.

Through document analyses, analyses of the research literature, and interviews with teachers, administrators, policy developers and researchers, this project has begun examining literacy concerns and needs of key stakeholders and their perceptions of how literacy research relates to their fields of endeavour in policy and practice (Harris, 2006a, 2006b; Harris & Kervin, 2006).

The pilot project has so far unearthed a deep concern about the efficacy of literacy pedagogies and their relationship to research, and consequences for the successful literacy learning of all children across Australia. Arising from our findings is the need for greater clarity regarding research priorities. Yet such an agenda, if it is to be effective, has to be carefully and systematically informed by an understanding of how literacy research, policy and practice relate to one another. In developing this understanding, this project could not be more timely in its proposal to address a problem of national (and indeed international) importance by investigating the nexus among the three fields; and examining likely means by which the

three fields could be more effectively orchestrated as they work towards the common goal stated in the *Teaching Reading* Report of effective literacy instruction for all students.

The significance of such research on a larger scale lies in its intention to establish an inclusive forum where researchers, teachers and policy developers can identify research gaps and priorities to help guide research efforts towards supporting classroom practice and informing policy.

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