

## **Editorial: What counts as research in English literacy education?**

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Over the past two decades, Western governments have embarked on a series of reforms of education and schooling. Literacy education in particular has been the focus of mandated policy changes designed to improve students' literacy standards (the most obvious example being "No Child Left Behind" (US Department of Education, 2001). Literacy is typically deemed to be in a state of decline and even crisis, necessitating the introduction of standardized testing and other measures that render teachers and schools more accountable (Sawyer, 2006). Such reforms are invariably justified by policy-makers as having a foundation in scientific inquiry, as is shown by current rhetoric about "evidence-based" research to bring about improved literacy outcomes. In other instances, inquiries are established to gather research evidence that will justify pre-existing reform agendas (for example, DEST, 2005).

Questions about the validity of the research claims underpinning such reforms have largely gone begging. The very fact that certain research has been translated into mandated policy lends it validity, as being of sufficient importance to prompt legislative action (Delandshere, 2006). The connections between research, policy and classroom practice have been radically reconfigured. Increasingly, policy-makers and their bureaucrats are privileging research which supports their policies, enabling them to resist any attempt to scrutinize the meaning or value of the reforms they are implementing. It is noteworthy, however, that many of these reforms have popular appeal, at least as they are presented in the media, and they are typically couched in common sense language that marginalises dissenting voices (Cambourne, 2006).

Yet the changing character of the relationship between government policy, research and professional contexts cannot be explained simply as a result of interventions by governments. It also seems timely for researchers in the academy to scrutinise their practices, and to consider how they might more effectively connect with the world that forms the object of their inquiries. And if government reforms are vindicated in populist language (as being a matter no child being "left behind", or as giving parents the information "they need to know" to ensure that their children will achieve success at school, as one neo-conservative commentator in Australia has put it (Donnelly, 2004), it seems worth asking why researchers themselves appear to find difficulty engaging with a larger audience. As researchers we might critically reflect on the machinery of research and scholarship in an effort to develop ways to initiate conversations with a wider group of people than our academic peers. How can it be socially beneficial to publish in refereed journals that nobody reads? But is the challenge simply a matter of translating academic discourse into readable prose that might be accessible to a wider audience? Could the very nature of the research we do be an issue? Perhaps the protocols we follow as researchers – the rituals of the research design, the proposals to funding bodies, the applications to university ethics committees – actually ensure that we talk only to each other.

Within a professional landscape characterised by top-down, “evidence-based” reforms, we also need to consider the increasing difficulties which teachers are experiencing in affirming the value of their own professional knowledge and experience. “Action research” and other traditions of practitioner inquiry have for many decades constituted a kind of subordinate discourse, a body of knowledge about practice that struggles to attain the status of academic research. With the current emphasis on “evidence-based research”, this marginalisation is being repeated (although there are also signs of systems co-opting the language of practitioner research – for example, extolling the value of learning teams, lesson study, peer observation, and so on – as a vehicle by which teachers might collectively work to achieve the outcomes which systems dictate (see, for example, DE&T, 2005). It seems necessary to revisit the knowledge claims that might be made by practitioner researchers and to consider their validity. What validity could such local knowledge have in comparison with the universal claims made on the basis of large surveys and other “scientific” practices? How might teachers justify their resistance to mandated reforms on the basis of their experience of specific communities? Where does their local knowledge fit within the world created by large-scale policy reform?

This special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* explores the role that research currently plays in language and literacy education. The contributors were asked to investigate aspects of the research/policy/praxis nexus as it is currently being played out in their particular educational settings. We provided them with a range of prompts, including the following:

- What currently counts as research in language and literacy education? What should count? Does research have any impact on the teaching and learning which occurs within educational settings?
- Why do we do research on language and literacy education?
- How would you describe the relationship between professional practice and research?
- What significance does research have in the professional lives of teachers?
- What role does practitioner inquiry play in developing understandings about language and learning?
- What is the relationship between professional learning and scientific inquiry?
- What is the relationship between local knowledge and the general claims made by science and policy?
- What does it mean to say that research is evidence-based?
- What types of research are relevant to professional practice?
- Do sociologists or philosophers have anything to say to teachers of language and literacy?
- What social, political and ethical obligations (if any) inhere within research?

The aim was not simply to facilitate debate relating to different types of inquiry, as in methodology handbooks, but to probe the meaning and value of research at the current moment. Contributors were invited to engage in methodological and epistemological issues, but always with a view to articulating the larger purposes of their work.

The task of engaging contributors in a conversation about these issues has not been easy. Our aim was to achieve a broader representation of contributors than is

presented here, including contributions from researchers who might have quarrelled with some of the assumptions or questions we raised. These include researchers whose work has been used to vindicate the standards-based reforms that many of the contributors to this issue criticize. In doing so, we had hoped to widen the discussion, to enact a dialogue between researchers who might hold radically different standpoints. Part of the problem, we feel, is that we were inviting researchers to do more than simply write about their research. We were asking them to justify their work as a socially productive pursuit. It is undoubtedly challenging to engage in reflection of this kind, because it means opening up one's assumptions to critical scrutiny.

But we hardly wish to diminish the importance of the contributors' voices that can be heard in this issue. To the contrary, we thank them for participating in this project, and for their preparedness to revise their papers in order to achieve the kind of meta-commentary we required. We hope that, taken together, the following articles will prompt an increasing number of researchers to revisit their reasons for doing what they do. It is only through such reflexivity that we might begin to resist the constructions of our work that others foist on us, and that we might truly connect with students, teachers and the wider community whom we are meant to serve.

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