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## **Key Issues and Future Directions in the Nexus of Literacy Research, Policy and Practice**

Pauline Harris

Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong  
NSW 2522  
Phone: 02 4221 3877  
Fax: 02 4221 4657  
Email: [pharris@uow.edu.au](mailto:pharris@uow.edu.au)

**This paper is Paper 1 in a Research Symposium:**

### **Title of Research Symposium**

‘The Literacy Nexus:  
Exploring Relationships Among Literacy Research, Policy and Practice’

### **Symposium Leader**

Pauline Harris  
Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong  
Wollongong NSW 2522

### **Paper 1 in Symposium**

Key Issues and Future Directions in the Nexus of Literacy Research, Policy and Practice –  
Pauline Harris

### **Paper 2 in Symposium**

Recontextualisation as a framework for understanding relationships among literacy research,  
policy and practice – Honglin Chen and Pauline Harris

### **Paper 3 in Symposium**

Using a Sensemaking Approach to Explore Messages from Research and Policy in the Field  
of Practice – Barbra McKenzie

## **Key Issues and Future Directions in the Nexus of Literacy Research, Policy and Practice**

Pauline Harris

### **Abstract**

Relationships among literacy research, policy and practice continue to constitute a contentious issue in the context of literacy policy reforms in Australia and overseas. Referring to these relationships as the Literacy Nexus, this paper explores the nexus in terms of research/policy relationships; policy/practice relationships; and practice/research relationships. The paper provides a review of related literature on these relationships, based on Australian and U.S. research studies and reports published since 2000; and highlights key issues inherent in these relationships. These issues include ways in which literacy research is used in literacy policy and the consequences of this use for the fields of research and practice; the extent to which literacy policy connects or disconnects with teachers' classrooms realities in the field of practice; and the question of teachers' professional judgment and prerogative as they make informed choices about messages from research and policy in light of what they find works for their students. As this paper considers these issues, it identifies research directions for investigating the literacy nexus further. Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to engage discussion about the literacy nexus and ways in which it might be strengthened to the betterment of literacy education. In so doing, the paper is framed by the author's engagement as First Chief Investigator in a collaborative ARC Discovery Project on the Literacy nexus.

## **Introduction to the Symposium**

In the context of literacy policy reforms in Australia and overseas, relationships between literacy research, policy and practice have been brought into sharp and oftentimes controversial focus. This symposium draws on the presenters' ARC Discovery Project (Harris, Derewianka, Chen, Fitzsimmons, Kervin, Turbill, Cruickshank, McKenzie & Konza, 2006) and critically examines the relationships that make up the nexus of literacy research, policy and practice. It does so with a view to understanding the complexities inherent in this nexus and identifying future research directions for better understanding and enhancing the literacy nexus for a sustainable future in literacy education. The second paper in the symposium uses Bernstein's theory of pedagogic device (1990), and more specifically, his concept of recontextualisation, to argue that the literacy nexus can be effectively interpreted as social spaces where ideology and social relations, are played out and relayed, through which specific form of pedagogic discourse is shaped to constitute school knowledge. Finally, the third paper explores how organisational learning, more specifically sensemaking (Weick, 1995) may be used to chart the connections between research, policy and practice in an environment in which education appears to be perceived by some as education as a type of marketable commodity.

## **Issues inherent in the literacy nexus: a literature review**

The literature review that follows is based on Australian and U.S. research studies and reports published since 2000. The review focuses on three sets of dyadic relationships that are part of the literacy nexus: literacy research/policy relationships; policy/practice relationships; and practice/research relationships. This is not to suggest that these are the only ways to think of relationships in this nexus, as indeed, the three-way dynamic among the three fields is ultimately of interest; and we acknowledge there are mediating forces surrounding the three fields that also impact the Literacy Nexus. These latter considerations comprise the next stage of the literature review; as does the extension of the review to include other international contexts.

The identification of these three sets of relationships was initially guided by Bernstein's 'pedagogic device' (1990) that portrays literacy research, policy and practice as sites or fields of educational endeavour. In this model, research is construed as the field of production of knowledge; policy is conceived as the field of recontextualisation of knowledge as it recasts

ideas from research in the generation of official discourses to guide and regulate practice; and practice is portrayed as the field of reproduction of knowledge as teachers implement policy in their classrooms. This model thus posits hierarchical relationships among the fields of research, policy and practice, and provides an initial starting point for visualising the literacy nexus, as shown in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Given the vigour with which connections among research, policy and practice in literacy education have been brought into contention in recent times, both in formal and informal venues, it is timely that this paper interrogates the nature of the relationships portrayed in this model. Issues inherent in these relationships are discussed, and directions for further investigation identified.

### **Literacy Research/Policy Relationships**

In recent years, literacy education has seen the publication of several research reports that set out to establish evidence bases for literacy pedagogies in school settings. Some of these reports have been comprehensive in their inclusion of theoretical perspectives and research approaches; and represent moves to bring competing points of view together in repertoires of teaching strategies and practices for catering to students in diverse contexts. For example, *Evidence-based research for expert literacy teaching* (Vic DEECD, 2007) provides an analysis of major theoretical perspectives that include skills-based and whole language approaches; the print-based and multiliteracies approaches; and cultural heritage and critical literacy frameworks. The Report synthesizes current research-based evidence on literacy pedagogies, recommending that teachers draw on elements of these various approaches to most effectively cater to the needs of their particular students.

In contrast, other reports on evidence-based research have been more selective in their focus, recommending specific pedagogies and confining their evidence base to particular definitions of research. For example, the national *Teaching Reading Report* (DEST, 2005a) defines evidence-based research in its Glossary as involving ‘the application of rigorous, objective methods to obtain valid answers to clearly specified questions’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 85). This definition is elaborated on in terms of ‘(1) systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation and/or experiment designed to minimise threats to validity; (2) relies on sound measurement; (3) involves rigorous data analyses and statistical modelling of data that are

commensurate with the stated research questions; and (4) is subject to expert scientific review.’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 85). Consequently, this Report’s accompanying review of related research literature (DEST, 2005b) is based on research defined by these particular parameters – echoing similar approaches, findings and pedagogic recommendations found in other related reports such as de Lemos (2002), Ellis (2005) and Coltheart (2007). These reports have produced policy recommendations that focus on explicit and systematic instruction of basic reading skills, with a particular focus on phonics; and have discredited alternative pedagogies such as constructivist and whole language approaches (Harris, 2007).

Such reports as these have had influence on recent literacy policy reforms while, at the same time, have had the effect of polarising literacy education. Calls for more balanced perspectives subsequently have arisen – such as seen in *Literacy education in school: Research perspectives from the past, for the future* (Freebody, 2007). This report synthesizes past and current research on literacy and encourages policy makers, researchers, and practitioners to take considered stock of an historical perspective of literacy education research, arguing that from the past we can learn lessons that can lead us forward. The report’s author argues against selective use of research to inform policy, arguing for the need to include observational research of teaching in actual classrooms.

In the context of this variegated use of literacy research by policy makers and contention of policymakers’ use of research in the research literature, connections between literacy research and policy have been studied in a number of ways. Some studies have examined the research foundations of policy documents (Coburn, Pearson & Woulfin, 2008, in preparation; Camilli, Vargas & Yurecko, 2003; Camilli, Wolfe & Smith, 2006; Pearson, 2004; Pressley & Fingaret, 2007). Other studies have analysed documents that have been prominent in policy-making processes – such as Grossen’s 1997 white paper in the formation of the California Reading Initiative (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Dressman, 1999; Pressley & Fingaret, 2007; Snow, 2000; Taylor et al, 2000). While differences among the findings of these studies exist, as noted by Coburn *et al* (2008, in preparation), these studies show converging evidence of policy makers overstating the strength of research findings and extrapolating instructional implications (Coburn, Pearson & Woulfin, 2008, in preparation).

Policymakers’ use of literacy research has been taken up in the literature as an issue of major concern for literacy education. This issue has been related to the political positioning of

research in which policy has been criticised for making strained extrapolations from research (Pearson, 2007). In this positioning of research, processes of selection and prioritisation clearly impact the place research finds in policy development and enactment. This positioning has seen policymakers' polarisation of theoretical perspectives in reports such as *Teaching Reading Report* (DEST, 2005), *Closing the Gap between Research and Practice* (de Lemos, 2002), and *Balancing Approaches* (Ellis, 2005) – evident in analyses of these reports (Harris, 2006a).

This polarisation has had detrimental effects on research/policy relationships, as evidenced in the fuelling of intense literacy debates and 'reading wars' (Pearson, 2004) that reflect neither the current state of play nor historical reality of literacy research (Freebody, 2007; Pearson, 2003). Such polarisation presents at best a piecemeal portrayal of literacy education in terms of its research base and pedagogic practices, and at worst, undermines the very recommendations policy makes for the efficacy of literacy education for all children – as evidenced in recent analyses (Harris, 2006a; Pearson, 2007; Turbill, 2006) of Australia's *Teaching Reading Report* (DEST, 2005).

Researchers' response to this problem has seen *inter alia* calls for constructive dialogue among research approaches and paradigms that yield a range of evidentiary data for policy development and practice (Ladwig, 1996; Luke, 2003); for researchers to redress imbalances and bridge the divide between polarised approaches and perspectives; and for researchers to scrutinise intended and unintended consequences of recent literacy policy reforms (Hollingsworth *et al*, 2007).

More studies are needed to understand when, what and how research findings move through networks and into the hands of literacy policymakers, to inform development of more productive relationships between the fields of research and policy (Coburn, Pearson & Woulfin, 2007, in preparation; Harris, Derewianka, Chen, Turbill, Cruickshank, Fitzsimmons, Kervin, McKenzie & Konza, 2006; Harris, McKenzie, Chen, Kervin & McKenzie, 2007). Such research might follow the lines of Song and Miskel (2005) in their study of reading reform in the U.S context. Related questions of accessibility and uptake of research by policy makers include:

- When and under what circumstances does research reach policy makers?

- How are the meanings of that research transformed (recontextualised) in the passage from the research field to the field of policy?
- What gate-keeping constraints apply to what research and related perspectives are admitted into policy development and which are not?

There also is a need to systematically document the effects of selective use of research on literacy education and the literacy profession charged with this endeavour; and to investigate and document alternative approaches that might, for example, develop and enact policy based on complementarity and dialogue among different research paradigms and theoretical perspectives, and full recognition of the complexity of literacy education across diverse contexts in contemporary society – such as suggested by Pearson (2004). As Freebody (2007) has compellingly argued, policy makers, researchers, and practitioners alike need to be attuned to a historical perspective of literacy research, proposing that from the past we can learn lessons that lead us forward.

### **Literacy Policy/Practice Relationships**

Studies of policy/practice relationships have been done in terms of literacy policy implementation and focused on two main questions of policy implementation, according to Coburn, Pearson & Woulfin (2008, in preparation):

- How are teachers responding to and implementing new literacy policy initiatives?
- What are the factors that influence the implementation process, shaping the degree to which teachers take up new policy ideas in substantive ways? What factors account for teachers' ability and inclination to change their practice in response to policy demands?

Studies of policy implementation (Coburn, 2001, 2004) have documented processes by which teachers and schools make sense of policy to implement policy in their own educational settings; and examined mediation of teachers' access to and interpretation of messages from policy and by whom (both system and non system actors). These studies indicate that policy/practice relationships are subject to teachers' interpretation of policy and related messages, that are shaped through interactions with colleagues and others in their professional settings; influenced by school executive's provision for policy interpretation and implementation; and mediated by system actors (e.g., teachers, executive staff, official

consultants) and non-system actors (e.g., professional associations, university researchers, authors and publishers of textbooks and classroom resources) (Coburn, 2005). Factors influencing teachers' policy interpretation and implementation include the intensity of policy in their professional environments, the fit of these messages with teachers' classrooms realities; and, most predominantly, the congruence of policy messages with teachers' own teaching philosophies and extant practices. This latter finding resonates with a key finding from Bailey's study (2000) that concluded that 'teachers may be placed in the position of violating their own deeply felt beliefs about what children in their care need when they are told how and what to teach. The study participants believed mandated changes required them to abandon methods and materials that had been successful with their students' (Bailey, 2000, p. 118)

Issues that emerge from studies of policy/practice connections include the impact of literacy policy on the intensification and expansion of teachers' roles and teacher/student relations. For example, Valli and Buese (2007) examined changing roles of teachers in the context of high-stakes accountability in literacy education. The researchers found that role expectations increased, intensified and expanded in four areas: instructional, institutional, collaborative and learning' (Valli & Buese, 2007, p. 519). Further, 'these changes had unanticipated and often negative consequences for teachers' relationships with students, pedagogy and sense of professional well-being' (Valli & Buese, 2007, p. 519). Such intensification and expansion of teacher roles are augmented by resource and personnel support for policy change that teachers perceive to be inadequate or inappropriate (Harris, 2006b).

The issue of intensified demands upon teachers relates to the degree that policy understands and is congruent with teachers' contexts and realities. Policy change impacts on teachers' operational space, defined in terms of the space teachers perceive they have to make decisions not made by other people (Smith & Lovatt, 2003). Changes in the boundaries of teachers' operational space impacts teacher identity by varying scope for teachers to exercise professional prerogative (Pearson, 2003). Research studies have shown the critical importance of teachers' professional judgment in the relationship between literacy policy and practice. Such judgment has been seen to involve teachers in selectively drawing on a sound, comprehensive and articulated knowledge base to meet student needs in ways that appropriate to their classroom realities and advance student learning (Allington, 2002; Anstey and Bull, 2003; Broadley et al, 2000; Dudley-Marling, 2005; Johnson, 2002; Pearson, 2003). The need

for teachers to exercise such judgment has been highlighted by exhaustive research reviews that show that no research has uncovered pedagogies that work for all children (Allington, 2002).

However, recent policy reforms in Australia and overseas have brought this aspect of teacher identity into question and so potentially weaken rather than enhance policy/practice connections. For example, Australia's *Teaching Reading Report* (DEST, 2005a) has explicitly problematised teachers' professional judgment, stating that 'many teaching approaches used in schools are not informed by findings from evidence-based research, and ... too many teachers do not have a clear understanding of why, how, what and when to use particular strategies' (DEST, 2005a, p. 14).

Another emerging issue concerns tensions between 'one size fits all' recommendations of literacy policy reforms, and teachers' belief systems and repertoires of practices (Broadley *et al*, 2000; Harris, 2006b). Closely related to this issue is the question of teachers' voices and professional prerogative. A key question here is, with what language and in what contexts can teachers have a voice in the policy-making field? As Hollingsworth *et al* (2007) have noted in the U.S. context of 'No Child Left behind (US Congress, 2002), this is a key question, given that legislative language is becoming the currency of schooling and technical language is removed from communities' experience, expertise, shared history and views of their children.

While some studies have focused on implementation of policy in the field of practice, other studies have examined how policymakers work to mobilise the field of practice into action, drawing on frame analysis (Goffman, 1974; Benford & Snow, 2000). For example, applying tools of frame analysis to the *Teaching Reading Report* (DEST, 2005a), Harris (2007) found that literacy is identified as the problem, defined in terms of reading difficulties and attributed to problems with constructivist and whole language approaches to reading instruction. Recommendations are framed by the 'all children' metaphor, for whom literacy success is sought through use of explicit and direct instruction of basic reading skills. Thus teachers are exhorted by the Report's recommendations to implement such approaches so that all children might experience success in learning to read in the early school years. What falls inside this frame is apparently inclusive in terms of all children and literacy success; however, closer scrutiny reveals that the frame is more narrow in terms of defining literacy success in terms of basic reading skills; identifying instructional approaches that work for children with reading

difficulties (Turbill, 2006); and drawing on an evidence base for such approaches that is derived from quantitative or scientific research to the exclusion of other research studies.

More studies on policy/practice connections are needed to document and understand implications of policy framing for literacy research and practice. For example, how do researchers and teachers respond to framing of literacy problems and develop counter-frames? How, to what extent and by what means does the contestation of frames among researchers and between researchers and policymakers impact the field of practice in literacy education?

### **Studies of literacy research/practice relationships**

Extensive reviews of the research literature have shown that no reading research has uncovered pedagogies that work for all children (Allington & Johnson, 2002). Such a finding problematises literacy policy that recommends or mandates specific approaches; and leads to portrayals of teachers as 'alienated executors of someone else's plans' (Valli & Buese, 2007, p. 545). Counter-portrayals see emphasis on teachers' professional judgment derived from a sound and articulated knowledge base that enables teachers to engage in reflective inquiry into their own practices in classrooms (Pearson, 2003).

Indeed, connections between research and practice – both in terms of teachers being informed by research and propagating their own research – comprise a substantial theme in the context of studies about teachers' pedagogic decision-making, reflective inquiry and action learning (e.g., Allington, 2002; Anstey and Bull, 2003; Aubusson, Brady & Dinham, 2005; Broadley *et al*, 2000; Dudley-Marling, 2005; Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson & Manuel, 2004; Hoban & Ewing, 2005; Johnson, 2002; Pearson, 2002, 2003).

These studies highlight the importance of a strong and articulated knowledge base on which teachers implement their classroom practices. Reflective inquiry and action learning/research are seen to be important means by which teachers can use and build knowledge in the field of practice. Studies have also indicated that teachers do not engage in theoretical polarisations and debates – in this sense, researchers' concerns are not teachers' concerns, as teachers use repertoires of practice to teach in ways they know work for their students and in the context of their chalkface realities (Anstey & Bull, 2003; Broadley *et al*, 2000; Harris, 2006; Johnson, 2002).

Further, there are indications that much reported literacy research is not accessible, responsive, straightforward or relevant to teachers' concerns (Hammond & Macken-Horarik (2001). Polarisation of research approaches and theoretical perspectives fails to acknowledge teachers' complex chalkface realities (Bailey, 2000), and consequently can have the effect of alienating teachers from research (Mills; 2005; Nicholson-Goodman & Garman, 2007). In the everyday environments of their classrooms, teachers encounter tensions between theory and practice (Cummings, 2002). Knowledge is tied to specific contexts (Bernstein, 1996) and knowledge in one context may not be easily transformed in another context (Wheelahan, 2007).

Studies have shown that teachers' uptake of literacy research is mediated by myriad factors, including children's needs, backgrounds, interests; resources & personnel support; experience; teaching philosophies; organisational norms, routines & priorities; situational enablers & constraints (Anstey & Bull, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Harris, 2006a, 2006b). In considering these various factors, teachers' engagement in professional judgement and reflective inquiry has been shown to be critical (Allington, 2002; Anstey and Bull, 2003; Aubusson, Brady & Dinham, 2005; Broadley *et al*, 2000; Dudley-Marling, 2005; Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson & Manuel, 2004; Hoban & Ewing, 2005; Johnson, 2002; Pearson, 2002).

Questions for further research include to what extent are teachers' practices evidence based and to what extent can teachers articulate the evidence base of their practices; and to what extent and under what circumstances is teachers' prerogative warranted on the one hand, contested or contestable on the other?

More studies are needed on how teachers access research; how and why teachers pick up and interpret messages from research; how these messages influence teachers' practices and policy implementation; how and to what extent research conducted by teachers in their own classrooms as action research or action learning feeds back into the fields of research and policy. Problems with accessibility and uptake of research by teachers may be exacerbated by tensions between how researchers are expected/required to report research in refereed journals according to institutionalised guidelines, and how teachers access and prefer to read about and validate research findings and recommendation from experiences and interactions with their

colleagues (Harris, 2006; Harris, Turbill & Kervin, in preparation). When and under what circumstances does research reach teachers? How are the meanings of that research transformed (recontextualised) in the passage from the research field to the field of practice (via policy and via other means)? How do findings from policy implementation studies re mediation and sensemaking relate to implementation of research messages?

## **Conclusions**

Relationships among literacy research, policy and practice are nothing if not complex, rendering the hierarchical nature of these relationships highly problematic. The relationships among the three fields constitute a complex nexus of myriad relationships that occur in various permutations and see agents engage in struggle for control within and across the fields.

In addition to implications for further study indicated throughout this paper, there remains a need for studies that bring *all* three fields of literacy research, policy and practice into view to more completely understand the permutations of relationships among the three fields. Only then can we understand more fully the dynamics of these relationships and the range of complexities inherent in these relationships and their impact on literacy instruction in classrooms.

For example, some studies are, by definition of their focus, confined to research/policy links and do not continue their exploration of these links through to the field of practice. Questions worthy of further investigation include, Is policy the only means by which teachers make decisions and access ideas from research to inform their pedagogic judgments? How else do teachers access ideas from the field of research? Does this access influence teachers' decisions about policy implementation? If so, how and to what extent?

Such studies would do well to investigate individual's perspectives and experiences from within the fields of literacy research, policy and practice on interactions among the three fields. Such study would include literacy researchers, policy makers and teachers, as well as mediators among the fields such as professional associations, professional development providers, consultants, publishers and the media.

In response to these implications, a team of literacy researchers at the University of Wollongong has initiated the Literacy Nexus Project, a nationwide investigation of relationships among literacy research, policy & practice in Australia (Harris, Derewianka, Chen, Fitzsimmons, Kervin, Turbill, Cruickshank, McKenzie & Konza, 2006). It is funded by the Australian Research Council. The project aims to investigate relationships among literacy research, policy and practice, and identify implications of these relationships for literacy education, with a view to strengthening these relationships for the benefit of literacy education and those who participate in and/or hold a key stake in this endeavour.

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Figure 1. A visual representation of Bernstein's pedagogic device (1990)

