

What Works? Engaging in research to shape policy: The case of grammar

DEBRA MYHILL AND SUSAN JONES

University of Exeter, England

ABSTRACT: This article explores how literacy research is currently being positioned to address the political imperatives of the day, focusing on debates relating to the teaching of grammar. It takes the international debate about the value of grammar teaching as the context for exploring prevailing ambiguities and tensions in literacy research, arguing a particular view of what educational researchers should be trying to achieve, and which methodologies might be most appropriate to research that is of social benefit. How might researchers on literacy contend with conflicting social and political demands? How might they reaffirm the need to engage in research that is both socially responsible and methodologically rigorous? The paper also seeks to problematise the notion of evidence-based research and to question research which is heavily shaped by academic or professional binaries. It will draw upon the authors' recent experience of creating a research design to investigate the impact or otherwise of contextualised teaching of grammar to support writing development and it will suggest that literacy research needs to engage with the methodological tensions inherent in literacy research in a more pluralist way, drawing on theoretical and empirical understandings from socio-cultural, psychological and linguistic domains.

KEYWORDS: Grammar, syntax, knowledge about language, writing.

INTRODUCTION

The debate about the place of grammar in the English curriculum is a long and sustained one, with research reports and professional arguments on the topic spanning over fifty years and crossing international boundaries. Andrews et al (2006), for example, cite 11 experimental studies into grammar teaching, dating from 1966 to 2000. Detailed reviews of international evidence for and against the benefits of teaching grammar, stimulated by a renewed emphasis on grammar in the National Curriculum for English and the National Literacy Strategy have been conducted by Hudson (2004), Wyse (2004) and most recently, by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information (EPPI) Review team (Andrews et al, 2004). It is a debate which has been voiced not only by teachers and academics, but one in which the “public have regularly and enthusiastically participated” (Gordon, 2005, p. 48). Everyone has an opinion about grammar!

Both the issue and the arguments are international, and frequently political. Concerns about children's standards of writing in the US and Australia, for example, echo parallel concerns here in England. In Australia, following the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey, the Minister of Education acknowledged that too many children did not achieve “a minimum acceptable standard in literacy” (Masters & Forster, 1997, Preface). In the US, the call for a writing revolution (NCW, 2003) to address the problem of children who “cannot write with the skill expected of them

today” (NCW, 2003, p.16), has been followed by major policy change in *No Child Left Behind* (US Department of Education, 2002). This has reintroduced grammar as part of the “raising standards” agenda.

There are, however, many conceptual and methodological flaws in much of the research base used to provide evidence in this debate. Much of the research justifies a pre-determined stance, selectively using data to support a particular viewpoint. Both Hudson (2004) and Wyse (2004) use research evidence to support their opposing standpoints. Bateman and Zidonis (1966) note that although most research in this area produces inconclusive results, these are then almost always construed as negative results. Tomlinson (1994), critiquing the methodological validity of the research of Robinson (1959) and Harris (1962), noted that the conclusions from their studies were “what many in the educational establishment wanted to hear” (Tomlinson, 1994, p. 26). Indeed, Tomlinson claims that most research into the effectiveness of grammar teaching does not stand up to “critical examination” and many articles are “simply polemical” (Tomlinson, 1994, p. 20). It would appear that over fifty years of educational research on the teaching of grammar has failed to generate “evidence” to inform theory, policy or practice.

The topic of grammar teaching, therefore, provides a useful lens through which to explore the complex relationships between literacy research, policy and practice. In particular, in this article, we would like to consider how literacy research is positioned to address the political imperatives of the day and is based upon a particular view of what educational research should achieve, which methodologies are most appropriate, and whose voices should be heard. To do this, we will draw on our recent experience of creating a research design for an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study investigating the impact of contextualised teaching grammar on writing. This study consciously attempts to provide a more nuanced understanding of the “grammar and writing” issue, to engage with the way in which literacy research is inevitably mediated by already-existing beliefs and practices, and to eschew some of the methodological weaknesses of previous research.

EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH

In recent years, fundamental questions have been raised on both sides of the Atlantic on the nature, validity and purposefulness of educational research, questions which suggest a crisis of confidence both within and outside of the research community. In the UK, there has been a political concern that educational research is unimportant and irrelevant to education policy and practice. Hargreaves (1996), in a speech to the national body responsible for teacher education in the UK, the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), found “educational research deficient in important dimensions: it was non-cumulative, not useful for improving schools and generally lacking in quality” (1996, p. 12). Hargreaves’ position was endorsed by David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education who argued that social scientists should examine what works and why (DfEE, 2000). This sparked a highly-politicised debate, academic argument and counter-argument (Hammersley, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; Mortimore, 2000), and a further report (Hillage et al, 1998), which concluded that the relationships between research, policy and practice were weak, that research tended to follow policy rather

than inform its development, and that too many studies were small-scale, ungeneralisable and poorly interpreted for policy-makers and practitioners.

This concern about the relevance and quality of educational research is reflected within the educational research community itself. The crisis, as it is currently being experienced by researchers, is partly epistemological, a consequence of the multi-disciplinary character of education as a field of inquiry, and partly methodological. Eisenhart and Towne (2003) report efforts in the US to establish a national policy for scientifically based education research, and analyse some of the contested issues which remain unresolved. In the UK, similar methodological tensions are evident. Gorard (2002a) has argued that too much educational research in the UK is based on flimsy research processes, whilst others have argued from a more philosophical stance about the nature of truth in research (Wilmott, 2002).

The “quantification” of research quality in the UK in the form of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), where universities are graded on the quality of their research outcomes in order to determine subsequent research funding, has fuelled this debate further, raising questions about pure and applied research. Thus tension *within* the community of educational researchers reflects the broader policy context *beyond* that community. The current position is aptly summarised by Furlong and Oancea (2005):

But despite the increased interest in research, there remains concern within the policy and practice communities about the apparent lack of accountability of researchers. For their part, researchers themselves are wary of what they see as a push towards a “marketisation” of the research process, they emphasise the continuing need to contribute to “pure”, theoretical knowledge rather than merely to pragmatic concerns about “what works”. In other words, a “new social contract for research” is under negotiation. It is in this context that we need to understand the increased interest in applied and practice-based research and need to consider issues of quality (2005, p. 6).

At the heart of this debate is the strength of the connections between research, policy-making and professional practitioners. Fullan (1995) argued that whilst school effectiveness research might provide useful information, it rarely linked the research to operational principles or practices. Recently, there have been more explicit efforts to strengthen the research-practice interface, and in particular to establish evidence-based policy-making. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Research Strategy has as one of its aims “to combine high quality research, feeding into evidence-based policy, with clear dissemination of our findings to policy makers in the department and of our interests and priorities to the research community” (p. 6). Equally, the English regulatory body for educational inspection, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), also has as part of its Development Plan the goal to make “more systematic use of educational research” (OFSTED, 2003, p. 11). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2002 review of educational research in the UK noted that this principle mirrors similar developments in the US, notably that “the Clinton administration initiated standards-based reforms and pursued a policy of improving the implementation of government programmes. The Bush administration has continued the reforms while also advocating ‘evidence-based’ policy making, especially in education” (OECD, 2002,

p. 13). As a consequence the “coupling of education research with federally funded programmes” (Eisenhart & Towne, 2003, p. 32) is becoming a more common occurrence.

However, the strong political advocacy of evidence-based practice in literacy is problematic. The underlying principle of “what works?” is itself contestable. Biesta (2007) notes that embedded in the question “what works?” are differentially positioned voices and privileges: “the focus on ‘what works’ makes it difficult if not impossible to ask the question what it should work for and who should have a say in determining the latter” (Biesta, 2007, p. 5). Inevitably, those who determine the research questions to examine what works are not learners or teachers, but policy-makers and academics. The question of what works is located within the broader context of other social relationships, values and purposes. The issue of what pedagogical approach works best in the teaching of reading was not prompted by teachers’, children’s or parents’ concerns about reading, but by policy-makers. Teachers in England might well ask “what works?” questions – such as “Does a decontextualised starter activity support pupil learning?” or “Does whole-class, interactive, literacy teaching increase pupil engagement?” – but such questions, though voiced in professional contexts, are rarely voiced in policy or academic contexts. These would be questions which emerge from the professional experience of putting literacy policy into practice, and would potentially be a rich source of investigations which would support the development of both literacy policy and pedagogy. But, in general, evidence-based questions serve particular ends for particular groups, frequently governed by political imperatives.

Moreover, silently underpinning the evidence-based movement is an epistemological stance which sees experimental methodology as the only valid basis for determining what works. A recent report on effective instructional strategies for teaching writing (Graham & Perin, 2007) states that it is “based strictly on experimental and quasi-experimental research” on the grounds that this is the “only type of research that allows for rigorous comparison of effects across studies” (2007, p. 12). To an extent this is true, if rigorous comparison of “effect sizes” is what is required, but this is not the only way to uncover valid evidence about effectiveness. Likewise, the EPPI review of the effect of grammar teaching (EPPI, 2004) concludes by calling for “a conclusive, large scale and well-designed randomised controlled trial” (EPPI, 2004, p. 49) into the impact of grammar teaching on writing, signalling methodological preference for positivist research designs.

The notion of evidence-based practice is founded on a “causal model of professional action” (Biesta, 2007, p. 7), in which teachers following agreed policy-approved practices will all occasion the same outcomes. It is essentially an input-output model which takes little cognisance of the complex, socially and culturally mediated ways in which classrooms function. This is very much implicit in the literacy policy enshrined in the English National Primary and Secondary Strategies, which frequently refer to such things as the “instructional sequence for writing”, encouraging teachers to routinely follow these steps. But Black and Wiliam (2003, p. 633) recognise that understanding how teachers implement policy, “how teachers take on research, adapt it, and make it their own”, is actually both more important and more difficult than identifying “what works”.

PROFESSIONAL AND POLITICAL BINARITIES

A further contemporary problem with literacy research is that it is often too heavily framed by political and professional binaries, where research is used by policy-makers and academics to support their own beliefs or needs, rather than to inform, leading to competing claims and counter-claims, based on research which confirms pre-existing assumptions and beliefs. One fundamental question is whether, in linking research with governmental literacy initiatives, educational research is used to inform policy, or to justify policy. Where research is commissioned by government agencies, it can divest educational research of its independent authority and reduce it “to the role of legitimating policy” (Gorard, 2002, p. 382). Gorard argues strongly that excess political control of research might subordinate it “to the needs of policy makers and political agitators” with the attendant danger that the research may simply be used “to justify already-prepared programmes of action” (Gorard, 2002, p. 386).

There is evidence of this in England, with the Beard review of evidence (DfEE, 1998) for the Primary Literacy Strategy and the Harrison (DfES, 2002) review of evidence for literacy policy in the secondary phase both post-dating the implementation of the policy. More recently, the Rose Review of the most effective ways to teach early reading was led by Alexander Rose, a known advocate of phonics. National literacy policy has already deemed the teaching of grammar as effective, as explicit teaching of grammar is embedded in the teaching objectives for literacy in both the Primary National Strategy and the Secondary National Strategy. In the rationale section of the teachers’ support publication *Grammar for writing* (DfES, 2000), an unequivocal assertion of effectiveness is made: “the emphasis is on how children’s growing understanding and use of grammar helps them to write more effectively” (DfES, 2000, p. 7).

Similarly, the academic community is also culpable in using research to support their own stance on a literacy issue, for example, Hilton’s (2001) critique of the Primary Literacy Strategy and Wyse’s (2004) review of evidence for teaching grammar to improve writing. Hilton’s trenchant critique of the National Literacy Strategy draws heavily on Hillocks’ (1983) meta-analysis and asserts that “the teaching and learning of how language works as a system is only weakly linked to better performance in writing” (2001, p. 7), but ignores Hillocks’ evidence that sentence-combining appears to be a successful strategy in linking language study with improved performance. Likewise, Wyse gathers evidence to challenge the National Literacy Strategy’s advocacy of teaching grammar in the context of writing, citing a lengthy set of studies which show no positive effects for grammar teaching. He does not acknowledge, however, that none of these studies investigates classrooms where grammar was taught in the context of writing. Many of the studies cited (for example, Robinson 1959; Elley et al 1975, 1979; Bateman & Zidonis, 1966) focus upon isolated grammar lessons, such as identifying the active and passive voice, and the writing used to determine impact is produced in a different context. Fogel and Ehri’s (2000) study is perhaps unique in taking as its starting point an identified writing problem, the tendency of some ethnic minority children to use non-standard Black English Vernacular (BEV) in their writing. The study set out to “examine how to structure dialect instruction so that it is effective in teaching SE forms to students who use BEV in their writing” (Fogel & Ehri, 2000, p. 215) and found a significant improvement in

avoidance of BEV in the group who were given both strategies and guided support. This is not addressed in the Wyse review. It would appear that both Hilton and Wyse are motivated more by the desire to challenge policy, than by the desire to present intellectually rigorous evidence. Just as policy-makers abuse research to justify policy decisions, so academics abuse research to justify policy challenges.

As we write this, we are humbly mindful that the urge to cherry-pick evidence to suit the argument is a strong one, and no doubt, could be found guilty ourselves! But the point is important: if educational research in literacy is only ever used to justify policy or pre-existing beliefs then it is impotent. Instead, literacy research should be asking awkward questions, challenging thinking, providing unanticipated perspectives on familiar constructs and, if appropriate, making us uncomfortable. As academics, in the case of our own research on grammar and writing, we have previously been involved with several projects on writing, with a linguistic focus, sponsored by quasi-governmental bodies and we bring to the research a belief that pedagogically sound and rich teaching of grammar in a purposeful context could, or even should, bring positive learning benefits to the writing classroom. The political assumption that it does work, and our academic/professional belief that it should, needed to be acknowledged in designing our study to avoid simply setting out to find evidence to support our starting position.

METHODOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL BINARIES

In approaching the research design for our study of grammar teaching in writing classrooms, we rapidly became aware of methodological binaries that we needed to think through. Reviewing research into the relationship between grammar and writing, Andrews observed, “there is still a dearth of evidence for the effective use of grammar teaching of any kind in the development of writing” (Andrews, 2005, p. 74). It was evident to us that there remains a pressing need for robust, large-scale research into the relationship between teaching grammar and teaching writing, which seeks to establish valid causal relationships, but which also seeks to go beyond simple cause-effect paradigms to understand the complexity of the issue. In addition, we wanted to adopt an inter-disciplinary conceptual framework, which was cognisant of linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives, in order to reflect with validity the complexity of classrooms as teaching and learning contexts. Whilst, on the one hand, it is important to be mindful of the cognitive demands of writing production, and the challenge all writers face of keeping in mind “the conceptual message together with their rhetorical objectives and at the same time appeal to linguistic knowledge to express their ideas correctly and appropriately” (van Gelderen, 2005, p. 215), it is equally important to foreground the linguists’ perspective “that terminology and rules are pointless if your mind hasn’t grasped the concepts behind the terminology” (Keith, 1997, p. 12). In addition, the cognitive and linguistic challenges of writing need to be bounded by an acknowledgement that writing is “material social practice in which meaning is actively made, rather than passively relayed or effortlessly produced” (Micciche, 2004, p. 719).

Given the call in the EPPI review for a “conclusive, large scale and well-designed randomised controlled trial” (EPPI, 2004, p. 49), we decided to step out of our own empirical comfort zone and generate a research design which embraced the idea of a

randomised control trial (RCT) but which attempted to incorporate it within a more methodologically inclusive design. The RCT, however, is perhaps the supreme example of the methodological binaries which beset educational research, and the RCT is, to an extent, emblematic of the evidence-based research movement.

The RCT model is borrowed from medicine, and draws on the methods and practices familiar in, for example, drugs trials. Oakley (2000) called for the medical model of research to be introduced in the social sciences, in particular, the focus on experiment and meta-analysis. The use of RCTs in America has always been more widespread than in the UK (Leigh, 2003); indeed Slavin (2002) argued that the experimental design is the “design of choice...for evaluations of educational initiatives” (2002, p. 18). In calling for the introduction of RCTs in education in the UK, proponents of the movement aimed to put educational research on both a scientific basis and make it comparable with international studies. Those in favour of RCTs view them as the most rigorous form of research, and the term “gold standard” is frequently used to describe them (Moore, Graham & Diamond, 2003). Torgerson et al (2002) argue that “the most rigorous quantitative study design for evaluating whether or not an intervention based on a causal question is effective is the RCT” (p. 20).

Advocates of RCTs are sceptical about the claims of much educational research which, whilst beneficial to a particular site, cannot be generalised to a larger population, and therefore cannot be used to inform policy, whereas “controlled (especially randomised controlled trials) have the potential to provide the most robust evidence (Torgerson et al, 2004, p. 12). Here greater value is attributed to findings that can be generalized and applied to other situations as opposed to more fine-grained, interpretive studies that focus on the dynamic or structure of a specific situation and seek to draw out its general significance for others working in similar situations. Thomas (2004) notes that many proponents of RCTs believe them to be “at the core of the evidential armoury” (p. 10). Countering the criticism from educational researchers that education is too complex to be amenable to RCT methods, Coe et al (2003) argue that if this is so, then only site-specific, local advice can ever be given and there can be no general educational policies.

Many of the arguments against the use of RCTs are epistemological, reflecting polarised views of truth and evidence. Morrison (2001) argues that whilst RCTs have a place in education, it is a limited place and they are not the solution that their advocates would have us believe. Hammersley (2001) argues that the evidence-based education movement is underpinned by a positivist epistemology: he cites as evidence the advocacy of systematic reviews, which value RCTs highly, as proposed by the EPPI centre. He cites Polanyi’s argument against positivism that far from being objective, positivism relies on personal or tacit knowledge and that scientific study requires judgements and interpretations similar to other forms of study (Polanyi, 1959, 1966, cited in Hammersley, 2001). Morrison (2001) notes that the natural sciences which provide the model for RCTs are becoming critical of the notion of generalising and are beginning to argue against the universal, deterministic, predictable models that RCTs are based upon. Morrison observes that these are lessons that education should learn from, especially the view that cause and effect are not a linear, continuous function. He maintains that the closed system of the RCT is limited as a research method for the open, diverse and dynamic system of education. The idea that medicine and education are sufficiently similar to permit

methodological transposition from one domain to the other is contested by Biesta (2007), who points out that “a student is not an illness just as teaching is not a cure” (Biesta, 2007, p. 8).

RECONCILING BINARY PERSPECTIVES: DESIGNING THE RESEARCH

As already noted, the EPPI review of the effect of grammar teaching (EPPI, 2004) concludes by calling for “a conclusive, large scale and well-designed randomised controlled trial” (EPPI, 2004, p. 49) into the impact of grammar teaching on writing. We would argue that no such RCT could be conclusive because of the complexity of both the empirical question and the educational context. To suggest that teaching anything might have a simple causal relationship (the teaching of metaphor on understanding poetry; exploring Shakespeare through drama) always ignores the multiple ways in which any strategy or subject matter is mediated by the teacher and the multiple ways in which learners respond. The classic RCT is epistemologically predicated upon the notion that teaching as an activity is an intervention which has direct causal impacts on outcomes. However, education is “not a process of physical interaction but a process of symbolic or symbolically mediated interaction” (Biesta, 2007, p. 8). One intervention can be realised in multiple outcomes for learners and one intervention strategy can be multiply interpreted and mediated in the classroom by different teachers. Indeed, as Shadish, Cook and Campbell argue, causal relationships are rarely deterministic: “to different degrees, all causal relationships are context dependent” (Shadish et al, 2002, p. 5). What is needed is to better understand the multiple complexities of any pedagogical context: the teacher, and his or her beliefs and practices; the learner, and his or her motivations and difficulties; and the classroom as a site for situated and negotiated construction of learning. It seems significant that national policy in England is attempting to make explicit connections between the teaching of grammar and the teaching of writing, and it is important to interrogate how that policy is mediated or resisted in professional practice.

Our intellectual goal in embarking on this research was not to prove a point, test a hypothesis or justify professional practice or policy. Our goal was to understand. We were less interested in simplistic conceptualisations of “what works”, and more interested in exploring and understanding the different and differential ways in which teaching grammar potentially impacts upon writing. Specifically, we were concerned to investigate what impact, if any, contextualised grammar teaching has upon pupils’ writing and pupils’ metalinguistic understanding. The choice to incorporate an RCT into the study was deliberate, but not easy. Like many other literacy researchers, the multi-dimensional and complex nature of interpretive research is comfortable and familiar to us, possibly especially so because our academic route into research has involved the literary critical examination of texts and values the multiplicity of interpretation and the meaning-making activity of reading. Qualitative research is natural territory for us.

So why decide to make use of an RCT at all, given our reservations about its positivist epistemological foundations? Firstly, the call in the EPPI review (2004) for an RCT was an intellectual gauntlet, a challenge to us to consider open-mindedly the possible benefits of an RCT over our natural preference for qualitative research. Secondly, the long line of arguments on the merits or otherwise of grammar teaching appears to be

reliant upon theoretical opinion, or flawed empirical studies, none of which investigated teaching grammar in the context of writing. A large-scale intervention study has the potential to offer a serious challenge to or confirmation of these earlier studies. In recognising this, we were also aware that at both national and international level, the outcomes of an RCT might carry more weight both within the scientific community and with policy-makers. To that extent, the decision to use an RCT was a pragmatic decision, borne of a desire to make a difference. Finally, we were aware, as stated earlier, of our own pre-existing view that teaching grammar in the context of writing could work: an RCT distances the researchers from the data, and the large-scale quantitative analysis permits patterns and results to emerge which may be neither anticipated nor consonant with our own expectations. Interrogated critically, the RCT may provide data which sheds light or raises further questions related to deeper pedagogical and conceptual issues. We do not believe the RCT will “prove” whether grammar teaching works: but we do believe there are benefits in adopting a research method which attempts systematically to remove bias (though we also recognize that the claims of objectivity by RCT enthusiasts are over-stated, as Polanyi {1969} had noted).

However, our reading of the literature on RCTs as preparation for creating the research design heightened our awareness of both the benefits and the pitfalls of the RCT, and we were reluctant simply to embrace the RCT as the design solution to our research problem. Indeed, our epistemological perspective, rooted in notions of multiple interpretations and contextual relativities, and our primary goal of seeking to understand the nuances of the answers to our research question, rather than rely on measures of effect, meant that an RCT alone was inadequate for the research design. A randomized experiment often “helps internal validity but hampers external validity” (Shadish, Cook & Campbell, 2002, p. 34) because, whilst standardizing treatment might strengthen construct validity, it can limit external validity, as in real settings this standardisation is not common. As the aim of this research is to generate new knowledge and pedagogical understanding which will contribute to theoretical domains, but which will also be of direct professional value, then external validity is important. Moore, Graham and Diamond (2003) have argued that a mixed method approach is important for RCTs conducted in educational contexts, maintaining that “to undertake a trial of an educational or social intervention without an embedded qualitative process evaluation would be to treat the intervention as a black box, with no information on how it worked, how it could be improved, or what the crucial components of the intervention were.” Likewise, Shadish, Cook and Campbell (2002, p. 71) recommend “the addition of qualitative methodologies to experiments” to provide better interpretation and avoid errors in applying research outcomes to practice. Therefore, to complement the statistical data derived from the experimental study, and to provide in-depth understanding of the theoretical, pedagogical and contextual implications of the statistical data, the research design included a complementary, qualitative dataset, collated alongside the experimental design data.

Mindful, however, that “our design choices have multiple consequences for validity, not always ones we anticipate” and that “every solution to a problem tends to create new problems” (Shadish, Cook & Campbell, 2002, p. 35) we sought to ensure that our research design neither framed the RCT as a simple intervention study, nor used the qualitative dataset as an optional extra. The research question seeks to explore the impact of contextualised grammar teaching on the quality of children’s writing,

foregrounding the importance of impact and context. A set of teaching materials will be designed which attempt to establish purposeful, meaning-related connections between grammatical constructions and effects in writing, focusing on the writing demands of the National Curriculum for English in year 8 (ages 13-14), and these will form the basis of the intervention. The RCT strand of the research design is well positioned to evaluate impact, but the context is also explored in two ways. Firstly, prior to the random allocation of classes to the intervention, the sample will be categorized according to the linguistic subject knowledge of the teacher so that this aspect of the context can be explored subsequently. Secondly, the use of multi-level modelling, not conventionally used with RCTs, permits analysis of how different groups (for example, gender, ability) respond.

It is the qualitative dataset, however, which will allow the most in-depth interrogation of the significance of different contexts. The study will involve classroom observations of all classes involved to capture data on how the teaching materials are used in the intervention groups and the teaching practices adopted by those not in the intervention groups. These observations will be followed by interviews with the teachers to explore their pedagogical decisions; and there will be interviews with all the teachers at the end of the study to explore their beliefs about the value of grammar teaching, their reflections on the impact of their teaching on children's writing, and their pedagogical thinking. In addition, the research design incorporates writing conversations with a sub-sample of pupils, once during the study and again at the end of the study, to explore their metalinguistic understanding of their own writing and their perceptions of the teaching they have received. The post-test investigation of children's writing will include a qualitative analysis of the impact of the teaching on the children's writing as well as the more metric-based data on improvement in performance. For us, incorporating an RCT and a qualitative data set into the research design was a positive way of reconciling the binary perspectives endemic to so much literacy research. In this way, we hope the research can be sensitive to the complexities of classroom learning, and the socially situated nature of teaching and learning. It is hoped that the qualitative data will both "inform future development of the intervention, and also to contribute to theory and understanding of the relation between context, mechanism and outcome" (Moore, Diamond & Graham, 2003, p. 684) and that the study as a whole will be recognized as socially responsible and intellectually rigorous.

TAKING LITERACY RESEARCH FORWARD

The current emphasis on evidence-based research, which appears to be a trend in all Western governments, is too often little more than political rhetoric where evidence masquerades as truth to justify mandated policies. Literacy is always high on the agenda of policy-makers because of the connections with economic well-being and, certainly in England, it is the literacy curriculum which has been the most contested curriculum subject – for example, the place of phonics in teaching reading, the role of talk, the texts which children should be expected to read, the assessment of literacy and, of course, the place of grammar in a literacy curriculum. From a politician's perspective – a non-expert in literacy but often voicing what is deemed a "common-sense" view – the desire to identify what works is understandable, particularly taking

into account the short-term life of most governments and the need to demonstrate success.

But an over-emphasis on the supremacy of evidence-based research, when that research is narrowly framed as positivist and scientific, will inevitably lead to policies which do not connect with the day-to-day experiences of teachers and learners in classrooms or the rich understandings of academic literacy educators and researchers. Moreover, failure to recognise that the policy into practice interface is not linear or simply causal means that even well conceived literacy policy may be unrealized in the classroom. Practitioners, as professionals, mediate policy in their own context, and their classroom practice is shaped not only by policy mandates but by their own beliefs and values, the children they teach and the communities of practice within which they operate. Black and Wiliams signal the importance of understanding the multiple ways in which policy is enacted in practice, and maintain that, despite the understandable pursuit of objective evidence of what works, “educational research can and does make a difference, but will succeed only if we recognise its messy, contingent, fragile nature” (Black & Wiliam, 2003, p. 635).

But laying the blame wholly at the feet of politicians and policy-makers is too easy. Those of us involved in literacy research share responsibility for the quality and direction of the research field, and this should include rigorous debate about epistemological and methodological issues, such as those raised in this article. Research in literacy tends to divide into those who adopt a socio-cultural stance towards language and literacy and those who adopt a cognitive perspective, each, of course, with its own dominant epistemology and associated paradigm. In the case of writing, the focus of our research, there is no unified, incremental body of empirical, theoretical and professional knowledge: instead, there are disparate, multi-layered and sometimes fragmented understandings of a pedagogy for writing. These reflect the often schismatic separation of cognitive and socio-cultural research, a schism which is reinforced by publication bias – consider, for example, the dominantly positivist preferences of *Learning and Instruction* with the dominantly sociological perspectives of the *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*. If we are serious about developing the field of literacy research we may need to engage with the inter-disciplinarity of literacy in a more pluralist way and draw with insight on theoretical and empirical understandings from socio-cultural, psychological and linguistic domains. This would necessarily involve engagement with the methodological tensions this creates.

We would argue that most of us involved in literacy research are motivated by a strong desire to understand and influence classroom practice and to inform policies which will enable young people to become articulate, literate citizens of the 21st Century. Yet Alsup et al (2006) observe a disconnection between policy and literacy research and note “the marginalized and arguably irrelevant role that English Education as an academic discipline and English educators as professionals have played on the educational and political scene in recent years” (2006, p. 279). We need to ask why this is so. Could it be that we are as entrenched in our own position as politicians are in theirs, re-framing resistance as mere opposition? In arguing for or against grammar teaching, for example, as do Hudson (2004) and Wyse (2004), we are in danger of adopting not just polarized views, but also expressing simplistic notions of the socially mediated realities of the literacy classroom, based on notions

of right and wrong, cause and effect, truth and lies. Likewise, to what extent have we as an academic community engaged with the major critiques of educational research, such as those voiced by Hargreaves and Gorard, in the context of literacy research? As Furlong and Oancea (2005) point out, the distance between opposing perspectives may not be as large as we choose to construct them: “Despite the fundamental differences between many of the philosophical presuppositions that underpin each research tradition, they seem to point to the same direction: to a shared concern about the strength of warrants for the relation between the research process and its representation of the world” (p. 12).

Perhaps we now need an honest and genuinely enquiring debate about issues of rigour, reliability and evidence in literacy research so that we could give better voice to arguments for the value of interpretive research. Perhaps we also need to be more willing to embrace and engage with alternative methodologies so that they can be appropriated meaningfully in literacy research. Most importantly, however, we need to discuss and articulate what we believe is the purpose and value of literacy research (particularly important in England where the purpose of research is in danger of becoming utilitarian – to secure research income and high gradings in the Research Assessment Exercise). Lagemann (2002) argues that educational research should generate usable knowledge, which is applicable, transmissible, embodied in professional practice, and which has the potential to make a difference. We would add to this that literacy research should seek to understand the situated complexities of becoming literate, to influence both political and theoretical understanding, and to enhance learners’ experiences of literacy.

ENDNOTE

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