**Literacy research and its relationship with policy: what and who informs policy and why is some research ignored?**

**Introduction**

The question at the centre of this paper concerns literacy studies and specifically practice-based and socio-cultural approaches to literacy research and their relationship with policy. Taking as my example literacy policy in England, I ask what literacy research has shaped the development of policy in the past 30 years and what role, if any, have socio-cultural and practice-based understandings of literacy - specifically what is known as the (New) Literacy Studies (NLS) - played in informing policy. Thus, I address the question of where the field has been and where it should be going to from the point of view of its relationship with policy. My focus will be on the initial teaching of literacy in the first years of primary (elementary) school. How best to teach children to read and write – what pedagogies to use – is an ongoing concern, receiving sustained attention by the media with debates referred to as the ‘reading wars’ (Durán and Hikida, 2022). In England, where I am based, literacy policy has seen significant changes in the past decades. Similar to what has happened in, for example, the US, a shift towards skills-based approaches has led to phonics becoming a daily part of lessons and a mandatory and assessed element of the curriculum. It would be wrong to say that this shift has not been informed by academic research. However, only a relatively small section of the wider research on literacy and literacy teaching is drawn on in policy documents and in guidance to schools and teachers. Practice-based and socio-cultural research perspectives on literacy have not been amongst these policies.

Over the following pages, I will try to understand why the NLS and related approaches to literacy have not found favour with policymakers. Following an introduction to the context/s I write from, I will discuss three factors or conditions which I believe contribute to our struggles to influence policy. I will discuss these in turn, being mindful though that none of these operate in isolation but that it is the confluence of these interrelated conditions that shape which path policy has taken and what research it has drawn on. Policy itself and how it has changed – towards an emphasis on specific skills – may be seen as the first contributing factor. Over the past thirty years, policy has moved in ways that have increased the distance between what social-practice perspectives might suggest and what is expected to happen in literacy lessons. The second factor is about constellations of research within the interdisciplinary field of literacy studies, as well as about the wider economies of research and what knowledge ‘counts’ in the interface between research and policy. Practice-based approaches to literacy are ill fitted to this environment. The third and final factor I will discuss is the role of the media and public opinion in the relationship between research and policy. Repeated proclamations of a ‘literacy crisis’ and of ‘reading wars’ create an environment where parents and employers are concerned and where policymakers feel compelled to search for single solutions producing quick outcomes. These are not demands that the (New) Literacy Studies can easily respond to.

Ending my paper, I will ask where we ought to go from here. Where should the field go? What research needs to be done? Should we continue to seek to influence policy? Or might our energies, resources and knowledge be better invested elsewhere, for example in working with teachers in local schools, developing ways to change local practices?

**Contexts: The (New) Literacy Studies, my own context and position, and the British policy context**

***The (New) Literacy Studies***

Born in the 1980s, with researchers Brian Street, Shirley Brice Heath, and others at the forefront, the New Literacy Studies (NLS) proposed a new theory or a new understanding of reading and writing. Offering an alternative to the dominant discourse of literacy as skills the NLS has promoted a practice-based, socio-cultural and critical understanding of literacy (Street, 1984; Rowsell et al, 2019). While rooted within academic debates, the NLS has always sought to develop the policy and practice implications of its perspective, looking carefully at literacy education and how it could and should be changed. Researchers have examined the way out-of-school, home and community literacies could be connected to teaching in school, supporting all children’s engagement with reading and writing. The assumption is that by building connections between home and school practices, literacy teaching can become more meaningful to a wider group of children, beyond those whose home literacy practices happen to be close to what schools cherish and expect (see for example Hull and Schultz, 2002; Pahl and Rowsell, 2012; Moss, 2021). A non-deficit perspective on different literacies, including the literacies of families from non-mainstream backgrounds, underpins this work (Curry et al., 2016)**.** Similar work has focussed on critical and place-related literacies (see Comber 2016) and on children’s writing (Chamberlain, 2019). In all this work, for scholars in practice-based and socio-cultural traditions of literacy research, the vantage point has and continues to be our commitment to social justice and our support for policies that lead to not only effective but equitable and empowering literacy pedagogies for all children.

This substantial body of scholarly work, published in reputable journals and book series, based on extensive research, has not reached policy. In England, where I am based and where I focus on, policy documents and school guidance, published by the Department for Education, do not draw on socio-cultural and practice-based understandings of literacy. None of this work appears to have informed the national curriculum. As Burnett et al. (2022) assert, ‘very little’ of ‘expansive understandings of literacy and literacy education’ has ‘gained traction with policymakers in England’ (p. 386).

***My context***

I am making the above assertion and I am writing this paper from a position of a literacy researcher, who (academically) grew up in the tradition of the (New) Literacy Studies, having studied for my PhD with Brian Street as supervisor and mentor and, since then, having worked for now 20 years at the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre, founded by David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic, all three key figures in the NLS. Prior to entering academia, I was engaged in international work to support the development of adult literacy education. While I see myself primarily as a researcher, I have always wanted my work to be close to practice and policy and to be of use to both. I have always wanted with my research to contribute to the development and promotion of not only effective but inclusive teaching and learning practices, being mindful of the inequalities that are a strong feature of many education systems.

***The policy context***

The policy context I am working in – England - is characterised by its centralised system. The business of making education policy (as well as much other policy) is firmly in the hands of politicians and civil servants in Westminster, the part of London where the Parliament is located. While it is in Westminster that policies are made, it is across the country and its different regions and counties that these policies have to be implemented and adhered to. The impact of this centralised system is manifest in the existence of a national curriculum and statutory assessments to be taken by pupils across the country. Recent policies have begun to change this, with a new type of school**,** called academies, able to forego adherence to the national curriculum and no longer subject to control by local authorities. The English system thus is structurally different from federal systems such as the US or Germany, where much education policy is decided at state level. As policies related to literacy and its assessments are decided by the Department for Education in London, it is difficult to shape and change policy without addressing this central institution and its related organisations, notably a national inspection service for schools, the Office for Schools (OfS).

**The first factor: Changing literacy policies in England**

Over the past thirty+ years, literacy policy in England has undergone significant changes. In early literacy education (by which I mean the first years of primary schooling, ages four to five and five to six), phonics has risen to become the favoured and, we can say, imposed approach, and it is now fully embedded in nationwide assessments, accountability, and inspection measures. This move is documented in policy papers, the national curriculum (and its updates), inspection guidance, assessments, and funding schemes by the Department for Education.

A move towards phonics is not unique to England and will be familiar to readers in other English-speaking countries (see Durán and Hikida, 2021 for an overview of developments in the US). Scotland too has emphasized the need for phonics as an important part of literacy teaching. Unlike in the rest of the UK, North America and Australia, the English Department for Education has chosen a very specific path, with a particular form of phonics having become the norm in English primary schools. This is called ‘systematic synthetic phonics’ (SSP), also referred to as just ‘synthetic phonics’. To be distinguished from analytic phonics, in SSP children are initially introduced to sounds (phonemes) and the letter/s associated with them (graphemes), with words being divided into these units, to be pronounced in isolation. Children then learn to blend (synthetise) these sounds into words.

How did systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) become the government’ s favoured approach to teaching literacy? Thirty years ago, SSP was nowhere to be seen in policy documents. Guidance on teaching reading was loose. The National Curriculum was introduced in 1989 only. The rise of phonics began in the late 1990s, when the media reported on debates initiated by educational psychologists linking the fall in literacy achievements in London to the use of the whole language method that, it was claimed, was commonly used. Labour politicians, then in opposition, picked up the issue and began to work on policy reform. The National Literacy Hour, introduced in 1998, was the first country-wide policy detailed and prescriptive enough to lead to each primary school in the country including daily teaching of phonics, as a component of the Literacy Hour. This marked the beginning of a move towards SSP and more central involvement and control over literacy pedagogies (Moss, 2016). While the curriculum had been set by the state, how to teach it had until then be left up to teachers and schools to decide (Wyse and Bradbury, 2022a). With the Literacy Hour this was changing. The Rose Report (2006), a government commissioned inquiry into literacy teaching, cemented this move towards phonics. Amongst its sources it drew on the US National Reading Panel (2000). But it neglected the Panel’s cautionary comments about phonics. Instead, the Rose report strongly recommended phonics as the best approach to teach children to read and write. Embraced by the government, since the Rose Report was published England has seen a full shift towards synthetic phonics, via a range of successive policy measures championed by the government. These measures include the establishment of a register of approved phonics programmes, matched funding offered to schools to purchase such programmes, as well as changes to the inspection framework and the national curriculum, all in support of phonics.

The Phonics Screening Check’s introduction in 2012 was a particular milestone in the rise of SSP. This mandatory assessment must be taken by all children at the end of year 1 of primary school (five- and 6-year-olds). It is an individual assessment involving the child correctly pronouncing 40 single words. Half of the words they have to read are ‘pseudowords’, phonetically regular combinations of letters forming a word that, however, has no meaning. The Phonics Screening Check was designed as a measure to assess children’s knowledge of phonics and their use of phonic knowledge to decode words. The Phonics Screening Check impacts the curriculum as children necessarily must be prepared for this ‘check’, including that lesson time is used to allow children to practise the ‘alien words’, as the pseudowords are often called (Carter, 2020).

Looking at these developments, it is difficult to detect any trace of practice-based and socio-cultural views of literacy in current policies. Understandings of, for example, the importance of children’s own engagements with literacy are not part of the national curriculum. This is likely to mean that non-mainstream, popular or non-standard literacies are marginalised. Criticism of the narrow views on what counts as literacy prevalent in schools are missing from policy and teaching guidelines. Also absent are references to multimodality or multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009). What has become more prominent is direct guidance to teachers on how they should go about teaching reading, using materials such as ReadWriteInc., one of the government’s approved phonics programmes. Such schemes provide specific guidance on for example privileging phonic knowledge in children’s reading, not encouraging the use of pictures or context to support a child’s understanding of a sentence or text (for an example see Wyse and Bradbudy, 2022a, p. 251).

The move to SSP in England has been achieved through large scale policy reform. Such a sector wide programme of change relies on the belief that the chosen new teaching method (here SSP) will work for all children, in all classrooms and contexts. Concomitant with this ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach comes a questioning of teachers’ professional expertise and fewer opportunities for schools and teachers to work with different approaches and different texts. To value and bring into lessons children’s own literacy practices thus becomes more difficult (Moss, 2021). As the systematic synthetic phonics programmes commonly used in schools operate with a set of teaching and learning materials, including posters, phoneme-grapheme cards, practice sheets and decodable readers, what counts as reading and what counts as text in these lessons is clearly defined by the requirements of these programmes. It is fitting in this context that policy documents explicitly ask for school’s ‘fidelity’ (DfE, 2022; 2023) in using these programmes.

Socio-cultural and practice-based approaches to literacy and literacy learning do not easily translate into clearly defined teaching programmes of the kind described above. They are more likely to be ‘loosely framed’ (Burnett and Coldwell, 2021, p. 432), expressed in the form of principles and example practices, with teachers and schools invited to engage with these ideas but to adapt and revise, embedding them in the community and culture of their school and their children. NLS-inspired pedagogies require an open policy framework, with limited central control and greater acceptance of local variation and control. Teachers’ knowledge of the children in their classes, and teachers’ professional judgement is paramount for such an approach to work. This does not fit well with the transmission-oriented approach of current policy, where new teachers are not even introduced to the range of research on literacy that exist (Burnett et al., 2022).

The above factors reveal the gap between what sociocultural approaches suggest and what policymakers are likely to demand, making it more understandable that socio-cultural and practice-based views of literacy have not been drawn on in current policy. Looking at the developments I summarized above it is reasonable to suggest that the direction policy has taken has worked against an infusion of practice-based and sociocultural ideas about reading and about what counts as text into government policy. Nothing could be further away from a social practices view of literacy than synthetic systematic phonics, we may want to say. Of course, in a way this is a chicken and egg situation. While the changes in policy we have seen are a partial explanation for the absence of socio-cultural perspectives in said policies, it is also correct to assume that the absence of wider views on literacy has contributed to the path policy has taken.

**The second factor: the changing research context and the research base that policy draws from**

It would be wrong to say that the shift to systematic synthetic phonics in England’s literacy policy has not been informed by research. But only a small selection of the available research into the teaching of reading and writing is drawn on. Looking at policy documents, available via the Department for Education’s website, a small number of studies is consistently being referenced to ‘evidence’ the superiority of systematic synthetic phonics over other approaches to teaching literacy. Amongst these are meta-analyses conducted in other countries, notably the US National Reading Panel from 2000, as well as a government commissioned systematic review of research on the use of phonics conducted by academics Torgerson, Hall and Brooks (2006). In a policy document published by the Department for Education in 2015 (DfE, 2015), with a foreword by Nick Gibb, then Minister of State for School Reform, a section entitled ‘The importance of phonics’ states that the US National Reading Panel has ‘concluded that systematic synthetic phonics teaching leads to significant benefits for pupils in pre-school until the end of primary school.’ (DfE, 2015, p.14). I have argued previously that the above claim does not fully match the Panel’s conclusion regarding the difference in effectiveness of synthetic phonics versus other forms of systematic phonics (Papen, 2016).

The 2015 policy document then references a study which might, somewhat flippantly, be called the ‘darling’ of English education ministers’ phonics reform programme. Often referred to as the Clackmannanshire Study (Johnston and Watson, 2005), it enquired – in two separate studies, one of them being a randomized controlled trial - into the effectiveness of teaching phonemic awareness compared to teaching synthetic and analytic phonics. It was conducted in Clackmannanshire, the smallest local authority in Scotland. The Clackmannanshire study has been criticised by academics for several reasons, including its methodological flaws (Ellis and Moss, 2014). And yet, it is the study that Nick Gibb ‘most consistently cited as evidence for the government’s investment in synthetic phonics’ (Ellis and Moss, 2014, p. 246). How the Clackmannanshire study caught one politician’s imagination is not entirely clear. Ellis and Moss (2014) trace it back to 2004, when Gibb, then still in opposition, was on the House of Commons Select Committee on Education (select committees are important elements of the House of Parliament’s policy making process) and nominated teaching reading as a topic of enquiry. The committee heard oral evidence from Rhona Johnston, one of the study authors. The committee report’s talk of the ‘Clackmannanshire study’ may be the first time this research was referred to in this particular way in government documentation (Ellis and Moss, 2014). From then on, Johnston and Watson’s study has been one of the most regular references for government policy. In a speech in 2011 for example, Nick Gibb explicitly refers to the ‘Clackmannanshire study’ as showing that systematic synthetic phonics was the ‘most successful method of teaching children to read’ (quoted in Ellis and Moss, 2014, p. 246). In 2015, as explained above, it is again used to back up the government’s move to SSP as the preferred approach. Fast forward to 2022 and the publication of the government’s most recent policy on literacy. In ‘The Reading Framework: teaching the foundations of literacy’ (DfE, 2022), Johnston and Watson’s study is again called upon, in the section on synthetic phonics, where it states that there is ‘convincing evidence of the value of systematic synthetic phonics’. Also quoted again is the US National Reading Panel (2000).

While it would be misleading to take the above to suggest that England’s Department for Education’s thinking about literacy teaching has not evolved from 2004 to 2022, references to wider views of literacy remain absent. Both the 2015 and the 2022 policies shows a new awareness of the importance of reading for pleasure, of motivation, enjoyment, and wider sources of reading. The latter, however, seems to imply a wider choice of books, with no mentioning of other forms of texts, let alone digital practices. There is also a new emphasis on teaching vocabulary, related to what is deemed to be the ‘word gap’ (DfE, 2022).

While the (New) Literacy Studies remain side lined, ours is not the only research that is being ignored. Several other recent studies conducted by psychologists and education researchers, including tertiary analyses of previous research, are also neglected. These studies do not substantiate the government’s claims that phonics alone benefits beginning readers, or that systematic synthetic phonics specifically promotes reading (Torgerson et al. 2019; Bowers 2020; Wyse and Bradbury 2022b).

How then is it possible that one study is consistently referenced, but many others are ignored? An additional element in the interface between research and policy is the role of people and personalities in policymaking, in this case one politician’s imagination (Gibb), who has been Minister of State in the Department of Education for many years, being captured by one academic and her study. Academics though are not the only ‘mediators’ (Mills, 2011; Moss, 2016), competing for ministerial attention. Commercial interests increasingly play a role in the process of defining and deciding policy and may do so to the detriment of academic research being heard, with publishers selling structured literacy programmes (Compton-Lily et al. 2020). In England, the prominence of ReadWriteInc. is a case in point. Its rise to fame appears to be related to its founder, Ruth Miskin, having been part of a government commissioned inquiry and review (Wyse and Bradbury, 2022a). What would and could have happened if Brian Street had ever spoken in front of a parliamentary committee?

Inquiring deeper into the selection of studies that policy documents draw on (taken as an example again the 2022 policy paper) reveals not only that psychological research dominates but that specific methodologies are seen as most useful by politicians. This leads me to consider the wider economies of what research counts and why in educational policy making. Research into the teaching and learning of literacy is an interdisciplinary field. Amongst those populating it are (educational) psychologists, linguists, education researchers, economists, neuroscientists, and academics like myself whose disciplinary heritage is mixed. Not all of these though are receiving equal attention from policymakers. Psychology seems to be the core academic discipline from which current policy imports its ideas. The 2022 Reading Framework for example is striking for the number of studies by psychologists being referenced and, often repeatedly, quoted. These include Daniel T. Willingham’s ‘The reading mind’ (2017) and a book entitled ‘Early reading instruction: what science really tells us about how to teach reading’ (McGuiness, 2004).

What explains educational psychology’s central position in the education policy-making arena? One explanation is the rise of the randomized controlled trial (RCT) as a core methodology in research on literacy (and education more broadly), a development, Burnett and Coldwell (2021) explain, that closely relates to the growing popularity of what is referred to as ‘evidence-based practice’ (and policy). Government documents such as the 2022 framework or the 2015 document (see previous section) make regular reference to the need for practice to be based on ‘evidence’, showing schools and teachers ‘what works’.

In England, the dominance of the ‘what works’ agenda and the related growth in popularity of randomized controlled trials began in 2011 when the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) was founded (Burnett and Coldwell, 2021). A charity, the EEF receives substantial funding from the government (via the DfE), much of which is invested into randomized controlled trials involving schools. Via its websites and online resources, findings from these trials can easily be disseminated and used by schools (see for example Burnett et al., 2022). Similar bodies exist in other countries, for example the What Works Clearinghouse in the USA. Randomized controlled trials are prominent in North America too, with The US National Reading Panel’s work (which, as we have seen, is frequently referenced in England’s policy) only considering experimental studies in its deliberations (Hoffman et al., 2020).

Randomized controlled trials, by the way they are designed and with the findings they offer, suit the kind of sector wide reform agenda that English politicians, as explained in the previous section, have pursued. The type of knowledge – and hence the research – that is required to back up such reform needs to ‘be easily identified and defined without reference to the specific contexts in which that knowledge will be set to work’ (Moss, 2016, p. 927). RCTs are believed to offer such knowledge. They are taken to provide ‘best evidence’ of ‘what works’ in the teaching of literacy. ‘Best’ evidence in this context is defined as statistically meaningful improvements in defined skills (e.g. the kind of decoding skills assessed in the Phonics Screening Check) shown in the experiment. Furthermore, the use of large, randomized samples of participants is taken to produce reliable indicators that the trial practice will prove to be successful when rolled out. We can understand then how politicians draw on randomized controlled trials to back up the promises they need to make to justify policy reform and the investment it requires. The effect of RCTs and of interventions of the kind we have seen in England, however, is that research using more ‘open-ended approaches’ (Burnett and Coldwell, 2021, p. 424) is likely to be ignored or dismissed.

There is a related factor to consider here: the way the research field on literacy has developed in recent years and the marginal position sociocultural, qualitative and ethnographic approaches take within it. In North America, RCTs are part of the growing influence of what is called ‘the Science of Reading’ (SoR). SoR, while not yet a phrase frequently found in English policy debates, supports the same kind of code-driven, phonics and skills-focussed approach to reading pedagogy that has supported the move to SSP on this side of the Atlantic. The SoR, as Durán and Hikida (2022) explain, has been behind moves in US literacy policy towards mandated phonics instruction. Relevant to my point here, when the Science of Reading has been taken up in the media, this has often been a narrow interpretation of what it includes, emphasizing the need for systematic and structured phonics teaching (Goodwin and Jimenez, 2020). Seemingly backed up by the Science of Reading, highly structured approaches to teaching literacy, with phonics taking centre stage, have found favour with politicians who are easily enthused by solutions that ‘can be mandated, packaged and sold to schools’ (Compton-Lily et al., 2020, p. S186). While two recent special issues in Reading Research Quarterly offer convincing arguments to suggest that the Science of Reading is much broader than what has been suggested (Goodwin and Jimenez, 2020), policy circles have remained deaf to these ideas. In similar ways, as suggested above, in England, an emphasis on randomized controlled trials and on evidence-based practice, helps to understand why policymakers have ignored or dismissed substantial sections of the wider academic research on literacy.

**The third factor:** **The role of the media and public discourse**

Digging deeper into the constellations of circumstances and factors contributing to the absence of socio-cultural and practice-based views from policy is taking me into the realm of public opinion and media discourse about literacy and children’s education. Their role has already been alluded to at the end of the previous section. Several elements come together to help explain the media’s role in the interface between research and policy, and, indirectly, the absence of wider conceptions of literacy. Literacy is a matter of interest to the wider public because of fears about children’s education and future. Many in the electorate are parents or grandparents. When the media report on young children, public concerns are easily raised because of our desire to protect and support them (Wyse and Bradbury, 2022a). The media’s reporting of prominent issues such as reading education (and its failures) can thus be expected to have a bearing on public opinion (MacPhee et al., 2021). In turn, this affects policymaking. Second, politicians need at least some of the public on their side, supporting their policies. With elections looming and short-term successes in need, politicians use the media to communicate more directly with the electorate, seeking legitimacy for their work. As part of the mediatisation of (education) policy(Rawolle and Lingard 2014), ‘spin’ has become an important ingredient of policymaking. Research can be an instrument in this practice. Positive press coverage of the Clackmannanshire study for example is believed to have supported the adoption of SSP by the government (Ellis, 2007). Persistent negative press coverage, on the other hand, can provide justification to revise policies and introduce new measures. Through the media’s support for such new policies, specific research perspectives are brought to the public’s attention.

Two narratives have been persistent in the media’s coverage of literacy and literacy education. The first is the already mentioned idea of a ‘literacy crisis’ regularly being brandished in prominent news articles. The second is the narrative of the ‘reading wars’, provoking ‘fierce’ (Wyse and Bradbury, 2022a, p.247) debates in mainstream and social media.

The literacy crisis is anything but new. Nor is it a particularly English or British phenomenon. In the US for example, in the 1950s, when a book entitled ‘Why Johnny can’t read’ (Flesch, 1955) became a bestseller, talk of a literacy crisis began to be heard. In England, the crisis became a topic when concerns about children in London seemingly failing in their efforts to become readers, attracted attention (mentioned above, in my discussion of the changing policy context in England). Since then, discussions of a literacy crisis have regularly and repeatedly popped up in the media, often fuelled by either the publication of national attainment data or of international league tables (see for example Garner, 2013).

More recently, the Covid 19 pandemic has added new fodder to the debate, with the New York Times (Goldstein, 2022) discussing, in some detail, what they call a ‘reading emergency’. That emergency, the author claims, is not only a result of lockdowns and children missing instruction, but closely related to a lack of teachers qualified in ‘the foundational skills’: phonics and phonemic awareness. The article goes on to talk about the ‘alarming’ effects on children’s lack of literacy while illustrating in some detail, one, by implication, successful school’s phonics programme. In England too, the media continue to discuss what seems to be a perpetual crisis. In an article from 2022, a quote by a the Liberal Democrats spokesperson draws attention to literacy attainments of 11-year-olds in some English local authorities from early 2019 exposing a ‘reading crisis’ in schools. Further on in the article, a parliamentary report is quoted to saying that pupils experience an ‘epidemic of educational inequality’ (Rimi, 2022).

How does such reporting matter to research, to the link between policy and research and to the (New) Literacy Studies’ limited role in policy-making? To address this question, I draw on the idea of ‘framing’, widely used in media research. Framing means ‘to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation’ (Entman 1993, p. 52). Framing thus always entails taking a position from which the issue in question is examined and presented. Media reports of a literacy crisis or epidemic frame discussions about literacy and literacy pedagogies in ways that raise alarm, create urgency and a need for action. The media’s framing of an issue is also shaped by what is considered to be newsworthy, likely to attract the public’s attention. Referring to the US, Purcell-Gates (2002) suggests that the media were in part responsible for creating or at least ‘talking up’ the literacy crisis (Purcell-Gates 2002). Metaphorical language used incites moral panics and political spectacle, as for example in a tabloid report from 2012 that talks about ‘London’s illiteracy crisis’ which is described as ‘a betrayal for our children’ and ‘a tragedy for society’ (Evening Standard, 2011)

As explained above, frames also offer suggestions for how the identified problem should be treated. In the ‘literacy as crisis’ frame, the treatment offered commonly is phonics. As part of this treatment, specific strands of literacy research have found their way into public debate. Looking at the US, MacPhee and colleagues (2021), examining 37 media stories, found that the solutions to the crisis prominently advocated were linked to the Science of Reading and its specific approaches to reading instruction. MacPhee et al.’s (2021) analysis also shows how the crisis frame is linked to the second prominent media narrative about literacy education: the ‘reading wars’. The reading wars are as old as the literacy crisis. These ‘wars’ used to be about whole language versus code-based approaches. These days, however, according to the US media (MacPhee et al. 2021), the debates should really be over: the ‘solution’ has been found: grounded in the Science of Reading, not surprisingly, this solution is phonics. Stories such as the one in The New York Times mentioned above, with their focus on phonics as the source of success, easily overstate the case for this method. At the same time, they are neglecting those views that show reading and writing to be complex and multidimensional processes and practices (Compton-Lily et al., 2020).

The ‘reading wars’ (see also Durán and Hikida, 2022) are not unique to North America. They continue on this of the Atlantic too. In very recent debates in England, two academics’ arguments for a ‘balanced approach’ in literacy teaching, with phonics as one amongst other components of the literacy curriculum, fell on deaf ears amongst politicians, who continue to hail phonics as the most important and essential part of literacy teaching. Calling for an end to the reading wars, Wyse and Bradbury’s arguments (2022b) were based on an extensive meta-analysis of existing research and a large-scale survey of teachers. Their conclusion that a ‘balanced approach’ (with phonics as one of its parts) is best for literacy teaching in primary schools, was met with strong criticism by the media and politicians (Wyse and Bradbury, 2023).

This episode illustrates how the metaphors of war present scholarly and professional discussions about best pedagogies and the research findings that underpin them as ‘paradigmatic and methodological trenches’ (MacPhee et al., 2021, p. 146). Such polarization hampers the development of research synergies, where different ideas might come together, engage in dialogue and lead to more comprehensive and inclusive approaches. At the same time, these metaphors add fodder to the requests for drastic and imminent solutions with visible results achievable in a short time frame.

The above discussion suggests that in a climate of ongoing crisis and moral panics, where narrow views on what counts as ‘evidence’ pervade the media, room for extended views of literacy, for flexibility in teaching methods and research synergies is limited. A final element to add here is how phonics and related code-based approaches to literacy teaching play into what Hamilton (2012, p. 2) calls the “moral economy of reading and writing” that permeates public perception and news reports. In the public imagination, the reported falling standards, and low rankings in international league tables, coupled with concerns about non-standard, digital or otherwise ‘new’ or multiliteracies, together with economic fears, produce a climate of opinion where many fall back on what they themselves were socialised into: a belief in skills and standards. Dominant views about research, about what counts as evidence and about ‘evidence- based practice’, disseminated via news reports and opinion pieces, further feed such hegemonic understandings of literacy as skill, making acceptance of different views about literacy difficult.

There appears to be little space then for the (New) Literacy Studies and related ideas to make their way into the public and politicians’ imagination. There is a final element of the debate where we would perhaps have hoped to infuse policy thinking with more of our ideas. This is the question of inequalities and the need for inclusive literacy pedagogies. With its beliefs in the value of different literacy practices and its pedagogical approaches allowing children’s own practices to be brought into the classroom, socio-cultural views of literacy, you might say, have much to offer to any education policymaker concerned about educational inequalities. In England, inequalities continue to be reported in policy reports and in the media, as concerns about the impact of the pandemic and, more recently, the cost-of-living crisis, are on many people’s minds (see Hobbs and Mutebi, 2021). This should, we might believe, create space for an infusion of wider ideas about literacy into current thinking. But politicians and the media have ceased the argument from us. Phonics is claimed to be the ‘solution’ to address the persistent inequalities in our school system with arguments made about phonics being specifically beneficial to students from non-mainstream backgrounds (socio-economic and language) and those struggling to learn to read. Commenting on US media, MacPhee and colleagues explain how the media present ‘SoR advocates as heroes fighting for students living in poverty’ (McPhee et al. 2022, p. 150). In the English press, systematic synthetic phonics is acclaimed for its success in supporting children from non-privileged backgrounds (see for example McLelland, 2016). In this context, attempts to examine the ‘crisis’ and what might cause it more critically, where ‘bigger problems than pedagogy’ (Duran and Hikida, 2021, p.16; see also Gee, 2012, Compton-Lily et al. 2020) would be acknowledged and diverse approaches be called for are easily ignored.

**Discussion: Where to go?**

In this paper, I have discussed some of the conditions or factors that, in my view, help us understand the (New) Literacy Studies’ limited influence on policy. Taking as my example literacy policy in England, I have shown how policy developments, research contexts and the media’s role have, together, created an environment where scope for extended views of literacy and related approaches to teaching, are marginalised and have little traction. There is no doubt that my ideas, framed as they are by my background, my preoccupations, and my knowledge (including what knowledge about the field I have) are limited. My comments in this paper are deliberately tentative and offered to initiate debate. I am aware, for example, that in looking at the media I have focused on traditional news channels, leaving aside social media, which as Burnett et al. (2022) have shown, are an important factor in the relationship between research and practice, with policy not being far away.

Given the policy, research, and media environment I have presented above, it is reasonable to ask if socio-cultural and practice-based research on literacy ever stood a chance to get listened to by the government. Or is there too wide a gap to be closed between what currently is en vogue, what policymakers cherish and what socio-cultural approaches can offer? The existence of that gap, the differences in perspective that underpin it, I have argued, make policy impact very difficult, even more so in a centralised system such as England’s. Where then should we go with our research? Before looking into the future, it is also necessary to look at the past and the present. In this paper, I have primarily looked at the ‘outside’ conditions that have made the infusion of ‘our’ ideas into policy difficult. Only occasionally have I looked more inwardly, at what our research has offered and where perhaps it has been unable (or unwilling) to respond to the policy context and its demands. In this final section, I return to the (New) Literacy Studies and related approaches and consider where we, as a field, have perhaps struggled and where we may want to turn our attention to in future. Once again, my thoughts are offered in the spirit of scholarly debate, asking readers to engage with them from their own perspective and position, expecting and happy to be challenged and corrected.

Looking at what we have or have not done, a few things immediately come to my mind. For example, how clearly developed are our pedagogical ideas? Drawing on our understandings of literacy as social, cultural, and ideological practice (Street’s ideological model, 1993), have we ever contemplated trying to develop some of our pedagogies into models or approaches suitable for larger-scale reform? Have we thought enough about how a practice-perspective could perhaps go hand in hand with the public, parents’ and politicians’ desire and need for ‘skills’ to be taught and learning to be measured? Of course, we are likely to have concerns about the effects of such a move and how skills and practices perspectives can be reconciled. We are likely to have concerns about what could happen to any programme we may propose, how its intentions may be undermined by the requirements of assessment, of scalability and perhaps more simply by the practicalities of teaching with a variety of texts and practices in crowded classrooms and underfunded schools. Engaging with policy then, entering its space and falling in with its concerns, may, you want to say, be too risky and not what we want.

Notwithstanding these very legitimate concerns (about ‘selling out’) there is, I would say, nevertheless no question of ‘giving up’, of remaining within the ivory tower of theoretical debates. In a recent introduction to a special issue about literacy research ‘in uncertain times’, reflecting on where the field ought to go, specifically given the experience of the global pandemic and its impact on who was and who wasn’t able to continue their education, Lee and colleagues make clear that we have to continue to think about ‘the role of literacy research in troubling how literacy is defined’ (2022, p. 1). We need to continue to challenge narrow views of literacy. Lee and her co-authors add that we must continue to think about how literacy relates to precarity, exclusion and social injustice. For me this means that we must interrogate the ‘political economy of literacy and education’ (Luke 2004, p. 334), what counts and what doesn’t. At the same time, as Lee and colleagues (2022, p.22) point out, when thinking about where our field should go and what research we should embark on, we need to be mindful that our research itself might be ‘complicit’ in maintaining the status quo and its inequalities.

So, giving up isn’t an option and I suspect readers agree. But what can be done and where should the field go? Rather than engaging with policymakers and trying to move closer to what they may ask us to do, might we be better off using our energies and insights to work with teachers and schools, seeking to develop, locally, practices and pedagogies, that while remaining (at least for now) within the parameters of the given policies, allow for infusion of wider ideas about literacy into the curriculum? With phonics being mandatory, this isn’t easy. But nor is it impossible or has never been tried. Phonics isn’t the only thing that’s happening during the school day (Papen 2016). Teachers, I believe, can be and often have been our allies and partners. Prior research has shown this. In a (very) small project with a local school, I have worked with a teacher to bring critical literacy into picture book reading (Papen 2020). Critical literacy is not part of the English curriculum for primary schools, so our lessons stood outside of what the school was mandated to deliver. Yet we found ways to ‘match’ what we did with the children to the curriculum and to the local guidance on learning aims that the school had to adhere to.

Returning to our role as researchers, there may then be a task for us. Assuming that projects like mine are happening elsewhere, with digital literacies, critical literacies or simply focussing on creative ways to make literacy teaching diverse and inclusive, as researchers we could set ourselves the job to find the commonalities that such projects provide. We would seek to identify the shared insights that, together, can be offered to give ‘evidence’ of ‘what works’ when socio-cultural and practice-based views of literacy are used in primary schools. Some teachers are able to draw on their pupils’ interests and experiences while still delivering the mandated literacy programme (Compton-Lily et al., 2020). They create lessons in which different literacy practices are valued and in which children and young people are supported in critiquing dominant practices (Bloome et al. 2019). These teachers may not see their work as belonging to any specific theoretical camp and they may not have taken part in research. Nevertheless, we should try to find these teachers and document what they do. We should look out for the research as part of which such initiatives may have taken place. The aim would be to produce a kind of ‘tertiary review’ or synergy of what is to be learned from such projects and from the teachers who carry them out.

The results of our synergy would have to be shared beyond our own circles, to enter into conversation with the media and with policy. There would be hurdles of course, for example questions of how to convince those not in our circles of the validity of our findings, when ‘samples’ are small and when the desired predictability and certainty of success is impossible to promise. Assessment would be another challenge and one which, as a field, we have rarely taken up. To help address these hurdles, we may want to forge alliances with researchers from outside our own field, for example with colleagues who work with larger groups of children. Together with these colleagues we could take a locally developed initiative and try it out with a larger group of schools and children. This would mean thinking about methodologies in creative ways, retaining flexibility, keeping context at our core, and yet examining what happens when our work goes to (some degree of) scale. This would require engaging with our colleagues in educational psychology and perhaps to consider how based on what we know from our in-depth ethnographic studies, a kind of ‘experiment’ with a larger sample could be developed and how this experiment would allow change to be identified, and perhaps even measured.

I am suggesting this because looking at the most recent policy pronouncements in England (the 2022 Reading Framework), while remaining firmly convinced of the merits of systematic synthetic phonics, there are signs for a broader outlook on what reading involves and what it takes for children to become readers. The Framework explicitly acknowledges that children need to find pleasure in reading and have access to ‘interesting and meaningful reading materials’, quoting the OECD (DfE, 2022, p. 13/14). There may be an opportunity here, based on what we know about the broad range of texts children these days get enthusiastic about, the many practices they and their families engage in, to make the case for literacy and ‘literature’ in the wider sense. There is a case to be made for extending reading (and writing) beyond books and to illustrate how engagement and motivation, how reading itself, can be supported by thinking of literacy in these more diverse ways. In tandem with this argument, we would need to continue to challenge the narrow framing of literacy in schools where what is accepted and valued as reading (and writing) is increasingly remote from the repertoires of practices that we all engage in. This involves inviting literacy teaching at primary level to consider the range of activities, texts, modalities, languages and language variations that really make up ‘literacy practice’ in contemporary times, many of which are part of what children and young people need and want to engage in as members of their communities, as citizens, and, later in life, as participants in the economy. I am not familiar enough with the policy context in other countries such as the US, but perhaps there too, regardless of the phonics lobby and its allies being firmly entrenched in their positions, similar spaces are beginning to open and similar opportunities for new literacy/ies research emerge.

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