



A Special Issue on language and literacy: Connecting research and practice

Journal:	<i>Journal of Research in Reading</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Editorial
Keywords:	Reading comprehension, Word reading, Literacy practices, Collaboration

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Manuscripts

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3 **Journal of Research in Reading Special Issue: Language and literacy: Connecting research and**
4 **practice**
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6 **Editorial: Megan Dixon, Sarah McGeown and Jessie Ricketts**
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8 A clear goal of language and literacy research is to contribute to scientific understanding.
9 However, such research often has implications for educational practice. There are examples of
10 research being effectively translated into the learning context, but there is also often evidence of a
11 disconnect between research and practice. This Special Issue on 'Language and literacy: Connecting
12 research and practice' was motivated by a desire to promote research that brings researchers and
13 educational practitioners together to understand and support language and literacy. We did this in
14 two ways. First, we invited submissions from researchers who had involved educational practitioners
15 in the research process. Second, our team of editors and reviewers included researchers and
16 educational practitioners to ensure that practitioners were involved in selecting, reviewing, and
17 editing the articles.
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21 We welcomed studies from any geographical region, with any age group, and on any aspect of
22 language and literacy. The 13 resulting articles come from research teams in the UK, US, and
23 Netherlands, with the majority of studies focused on children. The remaining studies focused on
24 adolescent students and adults who have primary-aged children. The aspects of language and
25 literacy under investigation showed great scope, encapsulating phonics, word-level reading, reading
26 fluency, reading comprehension, spelling, writing composition, vocabulary, and grammar.
27 Nonetheless, most studies focused on reading, or viewed writing or spoken language through the
28 lens of reading, which resonates with the broader literature in this field. Some key themes emerged,
29 with papers on technology and neuroscience approaches and how to identify and screen for
30 language and literacy challenges. A particularly strong theme was how to support language and
31 literacy skills in the classroom or via targeted approaches with small groups and individuals. In what
32 follows, we draw out insights relating to the nature of the research-practice collaboration in studies,
33 and their methodological approach.
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37 ***Research-practice collaboration***
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39 Across studies, the nature of the collaboration varied from a shared co-construction of the
40 research with education practitioners and researchers working as equal contributors, to a lighter-
41 touch approach, with educators offering implementation and feasibility insight. Vardy and
42 colleagues describe how they systematically worked with different practitioners to adapt the Peer-
43 Assisted-Learning-Strategies (PALS) approach for use in different countries (Iceland, the UK, the
44 United Arab Emirates and Taiwan). Their work reveals the importance of understanding the social
45 and cultural context of each country when translating evidence-based reading programmes for use
46 internationally. In contrast, Troyer shares the challenges associated with implementing research at
47 scale. Her experience of implementing a large-scale randomised controlled trial across several
48 administrations highlights the importance of effective communication and cultivating a partnership
49 that is valuable for all. Research-practice partnerships were often used to support the development
50 of interventions such as Word Nerds (Tortorelli et al.) and the Nuffield Early Language Intervention
51 (NELI) described by Snowling and colleagues. Other collaborations focused on implementation
52 processes such as the development, refinement, and delivery of professional development
53 programmes (Washburn et al.). Komesidou and colleagues show the value of consulting educators,
54 even if they haven't been involved in the research from inception. In their study, educators provided
55 key insights into the possible implementation barriers for the use of a screener for Developmental
56 Language Disorder (DLD) and dyslexia. Meanwhile, Vasalou and colleagues worked in partnership
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3 with teachers and teaching assistants to understand different ways in which educational
4 technologies could be used in primary school classrooms to support children's reading skills.
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6 A number of the studies share insights from using iterative processes of collaboration to refine
7 and develop both the intervention programme and the implementation strategies used. The focus
8 was on ensuring the acceptability, the feasibility and the practicalities of the intervention or
9 programme developed. Mulder and colleagues describe how teachers were involved in the research
10 from the outset, co-developing a prototype morphological awareness intervention and the pilot
11 evaluation. Early involvement was also described by Smit et al., with co-construction resulting in the
12 emergence of a process of engaged, reflective learning over time. In their paper, Hulme and
13 colleagues worked in collaboration with the National Family Learning Forum to ensure a family
14 learning phonics course drew optimally upon insights from research and practice.
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17 A powerful theme across the papers is the wide-ranging benefits of working in collaboration.
18 Miles and colleagues acknowledge how practitioners can provide insight into implementation at a
19 small group level but also emphasised the practitioners' ability to train and coach instructors in the
20 field. The collaboration between teachers and researchers described by both Washburn and
21 colleagues and Kearns and colleagues supported researchers to understand barriers faced by
22 teachers when using data to identify and support struggling readers. Landi and colleagues share the
23 reciprocal benefits of collaborative knowledge sharing. They embedded neuroimaging approaches in
24 school settings and noted the value of this for non-academics in dispelling neuromyths and
25 understanding what neuroscience can and cannot explain. Alongside this, the researchers developed
26 a deeper understanding about the complexity of building profiles of students' attainment and
27 progress and variation in instructional and intervention approaches used at school.
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30 Overall, better communication between researchers and educational practitioners was a
31 prominent theme. This is exemplified by Snowling and colleagues who reflect on the importance of
32 timely collaboration between researchers and professional colleagues including senior leaders,
33 teachers, teaching assistants, speech and language therapists, and psychologists. Their article
34 emphasised how such communication is crucial for developing interventions that are feasible and
35 acceptable for all stakeholders, and can be implemented with fidelity.
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38 ***Methodological approach***

39 The articles in this Special Issue reflect a broad range of methodological approaches. These
40 develop our understanding of innovative and methodologically robust ways to collaborate with
41 different stakeholders and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, programmes, or resources
42 aimed at supporting language and literacy skills and experiences. Many articles in the Special Issue
43 focus specifically on different approaches to co-design, synthesizing researchers' knowledge of
44 relevant theory and research, with teachers' pedagogical knowledge, experience and expertise.
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47 Papers also reflected different methodological approaches to evaluation, include qualitative
48 (e.g., Komesidou et al., Smit et al., Troyer et al., Vasalou et al.), quantitative (e.g., Hulme et al., Miles
49 et al., Snowling et al., Vardy et al.) or mixed methods (e.g., Kearns et al., Mueller et al., Tortorelli et
50 al., Washburn et al.) approaches, in addition to an insightful commentary by Landi and colleagues on
51 the creation of partnerships to study and translate reading disability research. As a research
52 community, it is important that we value how diverse methodological approaches can inform,
53 evaluate and improve educational interventions, programmes and resources aimed at improving the
54 language and literacy skills of children, young people, and adults. For example, in intervention
55 research, quantitative (e.g., experimental and quasi-experimental) research is designed to establish
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3 cause-effect relationships and evaluate intervention effectiveness in relation to specific outcomes.
4 In contrast, qualitative research (e.g., focus groups, observations, reflective journals) capture
5 important insights into users' and recipients' perceptions and experiences of interventions, including
6 an understanding of implementation issues (although these can also be captured with quantitative
7 methods, e.g., Komesidou et al.). After reading the breadth of articles in this Special Issue, we would
8 argue that when conducting research that aims to have an impact on educational practice, a mixed
9 methods approach, drawing upon diverse types of data collection is optimal.
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12 Finally, as a research community we need to consider carefully how we evaluate educational
13 approaches and ensure that this is done in a way that is acceptable and relevant for stakeholders.
14 Troyer provides an excellent discussion of different evaluation approaches, providing alternatives to
15 randomized controlled trials that are valid, ethical, and acceptable to those working in education.
16 Throughout the articles in the Special Issue, while stakeholders often provided input into the design
17 or development of interventions, programmes and resources, what was often absent from these
18 articles was input from stakeholders into the optimal method to evaluate them. Indeed, the
19 evaluation needs and interests of researchers and stakeholders may vary. Therefore input from
20 stakeholders into the evaluation process, taking into account their priorities, is essential. This will
21 ensure that evaluations are educationally relevant and meaningful for those involved in
22 implementation.
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26 ***Concluding remarks***

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28 This Special Issue reflects where we, as a research community and our stakeholder partners, are
29 at present with regards to collaborative research that aims to understand and improve language and
30 literacy skills. A number of barriers restrict the flow of information between research and practice.
31 For example, researchers and educators can lack a shared understanding of language and literacy
32 development, and how language and literacy are developed in the classroom. Priorities can also
33 vary, with researchers and educators being interested in different questions. One notable gap in this
34 Special Issue is participatory research, an approach which actively includes the beneficiaries of
35 research in the research process. Participatory research is still in its infancy and we believe this
36 would be an important and useful development for our research community to consider. In order to
37 engage with this agenda, we need to share our cumulative knowledge of effective participatory
38 research practices, much as this Special Issue aimed to share good practice in research-practice
39 collaboration. Overall, we anticipate that the range of methodological approaches in this Special
40 Issue offers useful insights for breaking down barriers between research and educational practice
41 whilst also challenging us all to improve the methodological rigour underpinning our collaborative
42 research. We hope that the papers in this Issue can help us all to work more collectively to support
43 the language and literacy skills and experiences of children, young people, and adults.
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