In whose name? Mapping voice and vision in a critical examination of literature on literacy in the lower primary school years

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**Recommended Citation**  
Harris, Pauline J. and Kervin, Lisa K.: In whose name? Mapping voice and vision in a critical examination of literature on literacy in the lower primary school years 2006.  
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In Whose Name?
Mapping Voice and Vision
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in the Lower Primary School Years
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Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes of a critical analysis of journal articles, government reports and agendas on literacy in lower Primary classrooms. While different voices and perspectives clearly emerge, our concern is not engaging with or promoting particular viewpoints and agendas per se. Rather, this paper moves beyond debate to focus on mapping these voices onto the kinds of literacy/ies they characterise, the instructional practices they portray, the research frameworks they utilise, the issues they articulate, the groups they represent, the venues in which they are heard, the audiences to which they speak, and the visions they encapsulate. In so doing, we seek to find points of connection and coherence to inform future directions for enhancing the nexus between literacy research, policy and practice, with the ultimate aim of seeking to equip children to function effectively in increasingly diverse and challenging literacy environments.

Introduction

Amidst literacy inquiries and proposed reforms in Australia and overseas, the imperative for children to successfully become literate and numerate continues to be high on the agenda of teachers, researchers, policy developers and government bodies. In 1997, Australia’s Commonwealth National Literacy and Numeracy goal stated that ‘every child leaving primary school should be numerate and able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level.’ A sub-goal further specified, ‘every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable Literacy and Numeracy standard within four years.’ Some nine years on, there continues to be a wave of research published in journals and reports, documenting the many and multifarious literacy contexts and practices in which young learners engage or need to master for effective functioning in their society. Reports abound, reforms proposed, and in the popular press, what research says and teachers do are recontextualised and sensationalised.
Clearly, there is no waning in the advocacy for literacy learning for all children. Research articles, national reports, systemic documents and federal agendas continue to proliferate and bear testimony to this advocacy. But in whose name? Different voices and perspectives clearly emerge, as debates become heated and threaten to alienate the ultimate goal for successful literacy learning for all children.

In this context, our concern in this paper is not engaging with or promoting particular viewpoints and agendas per se. To do so is counter-productive to constructive and reflective dialogue and maximisation of all resources that are at literacy educators’ disposal to achieve what is a national goal of high priority. Children’s literacy learning cannot be held to ransom in the name of promoting loaded agendas or biased points of view. As argued by Mills (2005, p. 78), we need dialogue in order to ‘go beyond the central binary oppositions of past pedagogies, transforming these to reframe innovative and relevant literacy pedagogy for the changing times’.

An important part of achieving authentic dialogue is the establishment of shared understandings. With that in mind, this paper sets out examine literature, policy statements and government reports, in terms of the following questions:
- What threads of continuity can be found?
- What notes of discord emerge?
- How can converging and diverging perspectives be orchestrated to formulate an innovative, inclusive and comprehensive vision of literacy learning for children?

**Background and Approach**

This paper is part of a broader collaborative project, officially titled ‘An Investigation of the Relationship Between Literacy Research, Policy Development and Classroom Practice’ (Harris, Derewianka, Turbill, Cambourne, Cruickshank, Fitzsimmons, McKenzie, Chen and Kervin, 2004). Informally called the ‘Nexus Project’, it aims to document and critically examine current trends, practices and gaps in literacy research in relation to prior-to-school, primary school and secondary school settings. The impetus for this study, and the paper at hand, has had its roots in concerns regarding the vexed and often contentious relationship among literacy research, policy and teaching. Contentions among different points of view can be fruitful to expanding horizons and re-thinking and strengthening one’ own position. However, taken to the extreme of polarisation, contention can only obstruct pathways of understanding, exchange and benefit among research, teaching and policy.
In order to begin the task of mapping voices – and this paper is just a beginning – a sample of literature was selected to include the following:

1. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* – issues published 2000-2005. This journal was selected as Australia’s longstanding, leading literacy journal that reaches out to teachers and researchers alike. A more complete analysis of this archive is presented in Author (Year).

2. The National ‘Teaching Reading’ Report (DEST, 2005a), a product of Australia’s National Literacy Inquiry that canvassed input from a wide range of key participants and stakeholders in literacy education; and a significant document in the recommendations it outlines and the framework in which it proposes its recommendations to be carried out.

3. The National ‘Read Aloud Summit’ (DEST, 2005c), a federal initiative related to Australia’s National Early Childhood Agenda. The Summit was launched in August 2005, and is slated to become an annual event. Documents related to this Summit are part of the sample for this paper.

4. The CLASS project (Crevola and Hill, 1998), a joint initiative of the Catholic Education Office and the Centre for Applied Educational Research in the Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne, was instrumental in its focus on early literacy. A Literacy Statement for Diocesan Systemic Schools by the Catholic Education Office which draws upon the evidence base of this project, has been chosen as an example of how policy and research reported at broader national levels are more specifically operationalised at a systemic level; and how a systemic initiative might introduce its own voice.

Each of these sources was analysed according to the following categorical units of analysis:

- venues and audiences that are addressed
- groups that are represented
- kinds of literacy/ies that are characterised
- instructional practices that are portrayed
- research frameworks that are used or drawn upon
- issues that are articulated
- visions of literacy education that are encapsulated.

Outcomes of this analysis are presented below, in relation to each source in turn. These findings then are brought together as conclusions are drawn regarding continuity and discord among these sources.

Published by the Australia Literacy Educators’ Association, an affiliate of the International Reading Association, this journal’s subscribers include individual researchers and teachers as well as schools as institutional subscriptions.

Groups that are represented in this archive include researchers, teachers and professional development personnel as authors of these articles; and teachers, students and parents who are participants in the studies reported.

Across an archive that spans five years, literacy tends to be characterised in ways that are broad and reflect the multi-faceted and ever-changing nature of literacy. These characterisations embrace multiliteracies, critical literacy, and literacy as sociocultural practices. As well, literacy is defined with respect to reading difficulties, tertiary literacy and literary theory. However, a large proportion of the articles (73%) did not explicitly define literacy.

The five-year archive portrays an array of instructional practices. These practices encompass the use of texts in classrooms that mirror the complexity of children’s home and community experiences and literacies. There is recurring advocacy for approaches to be based on a comprehensive view of repertoires of practices that literacy entails; and that these repertoires need to embrace social, cultural and technological change, imminent and in the future. Some consideration in the archive is given to practices related to prior-to-school settings and transition to school, highlighting the need to move beyond traditional models of literacy, to recognise children’s literacy resources across multiple media and contexts. In regard to reading difficulties, articles report the need to review appropriateness of instructional strategies chosen for struggling readers; renew aging resources; incorporate multi-level small group work; and consider students’ diversity, fragility of learning, identification, assessment, early years programs and financial support.

A range of research approaches are used, predominantly qualitative in nature and documented in situ through interactive means of observations, interviews and artefact collection. As noted by Author (Year), ‘53 articles, constituting 66% of the archive, were research inquiries directly conducted in situ, or through remote means such as written questionnaires, or both. Of these 53 inquiry, 27% used methods such as written questionnaires, interviews, focal group discussions and researcher-designed
protocols that were not contextualised by in situ methods. 24% of the inquiries used in situ methods of observations, interviews, and artefact collection. 15% inquiries used a combination of both in situ and more remote methods.

Myriad issues emerge in these articles. These issues include: diversity; the use of relevant texts in classrooms; the changing and multi-faceted nature of literacy and multiliteracies; the impact of technology in classrooms and students' lives; gender and the need for equity and access with respect to reading and to electronic media; nexus between home, school and community literacies and the need for home/school partnerships; assessment; and needs of ESL students and students with reading difficulties.

Amidst the issues that were identified, there was advocacy for active participation in the 'bigger picture' of policy development and discussions over what forms literacy education are most appropriate for members of society. Also emerging in this archive were teachers' perspectives on debates that are fuelled in the press and by government reports – preferring not to engage with polarisation, teachers tend to opt for repertoires of practices, choosing and adapting strategies and materials that work best for particular children in their classrooms.

Visions of literacy education that are encapsulated for the future are both explicit and implicit in the archive. Taken together, the lasting impression that the 80 articles provide is a vision of literacy education that must take stock of the plural and changing nature of literacy(ies), and the need to work together in partnerships to understand and serve children's literacy needs, now and in the future. Literacy education may be divided at the level of national policy and reports regarding best practices, but at the chalkface, teachers make the difference as they reflect on their approaches and choose strategies that are responsive to the current and future contexts of children in their care. Therefore, it is important that teachers are active participants in the 'bigger picture' to help shape an inclusive and viable vision of literacy education.

**The National ‘Teaching Reading’ Report (DEST, 2005a)**

Australia's National 'Teaching Reading' Report was commissioned by DEST as part of the National Literacy Inquiry. Invitation to input on this inquiry was open to all; and, by inquiry's end, 453 submissions were received. These submissions came from teachers across prior-to-school, primary school, secondary school, TAFE and University settings; consultants, commercial interest groups, private researchers and research companies; University
researchers; providers of pre-service teacher education; professional associations; literacy tutors; and private citizens.

Coming from such a vast array of backgrounds and perspectives, myriad voices and perspectives were documented in this submission data. In addition, site visits were conducted to twelve schools; and a literature review undertaken, sub-titled ‘a review of evidence-based research literature on approaches to the teaching of literacy, particularly those that are effective in assisting students with reading difficulties’ (DEST, 2005b).

The Report defines literacy as ‘the ability to read, write and use written language appropriately in a range of contexts, for different purposes, and to communicate with a variety of audiences’ (DEST, 2005a, p.89)

Whilst the inquiry was into ‘literacy’, the focus clearly became one of teaching reading, self-evident in the report. The Report’s Glossary states that ‘reading involves two basic processes: one is learning how to decipher print and the other is understanding what print means (Center, 2005, p. 7)’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 89). This entry elaborates on this definition, drawing on Clay’s cited 1991 definition whereby she characterises reading in terms ‘extract[ing] a sequence of cues from printed texts and relate these, one to the other, so that they understand the message of the text’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 89). Other clues to the Report’s characterisation of reading are found in the Glossary’s many and detailed entries on terms related to phonology and morphology of language. Multiliteracies is included as a single entry, acknowledging the ‘influence of contemporary communications technologies’ and identifying its ‘essential skills’ as ‘locating, comprehending, using, creating and critiquing texts within personal, social, educational, historical, cultural and workplace contexts (Zammit & Downes, 2002, pp. 24-25)’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 87).

On instructional practices, the ‘Teaching Reading’ Report advocates in its first recommendation ‘teaching strategies based on findings from rigorous, evidence-based research that are shown to be effective in enhancing the literacy development of all children’ (DEST, 2005, p. 38). The Report explicitly and strongly recommends ‘systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency’ (DEST, 2005, p. 38). The Report also recommends, ‘Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies’ (DEST, 2005, p. 38). In the Glossary, ‘direct instruction’ is defined as
“presenting material in small steps, pausing to check for student understanding and eliciting active and successful participation from all students” (Rosenshine, 1986, p. 60). Grounded in behaviourist theory... direct instruction programs are designed according to “what” and “how”, not “who” is to be taught’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 85).

Home-school partnerships are also strongly recommended, without supplanting but rather based on the practices and interactions in which children and their families engage.

The research frameworks that the Report draws on are made explicitly clear, in both the sub-title of its Literature Review (as stated above) and in the frequently recurring stipulation of ‘evidence-based research’. The Report unequivocally recommends that all literacy undertakings in relation to pedagogy, pre-service teacher education, professional development and partnership programs, be founded on such research. The report defines evidence based research as ‘the application of rigorous, objective methods to obtain valid answers to clearly specified questions’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 85). This definition is elaborated on in terms of ‘(1) systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation and/or experiment designed to minimise threats to validity; (2) relies on sound measurement; (3) involves rigorous data analyses and statistical modelling of data that are commensurate with the stated research questions; and (4) is subject to expert scientific review.’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 85).

The Report foregrounds as a key issue that literacy teaching needs to be more linked with evidence based research, especially with respect to individual children with particular needs. A related issue that the Report also highlights is teachers’ perceived lack of use and/or awareness of ‘objective, standardised diagnostic texts that assess the essential alphabetic decoding skills required for reading proficiency’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 8-9).

The vision of literacy education that the Report encapsulates is one that is successful for ‘all children’, who are seen as Australia’s most valuable resources, and who need to be equipped to ‘engage productively in the knowledge economy and in society more broadly’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 7). A ‘national program of literacy action’ is recommended, with several specifics attached; as are ‘lighthouse projects’ for exemplary practice in teacher preparation and professional development.

**The National Read Aloud Summit (2005c)**

In August 2005, during National Literacy and Numeracy Week, the inaugural ‘The Whoever You Are, Wherever You Are – You Can
Read Aloud Summit’ was held in Sydney. This two-day Summit was intended to help advance the Australian federal government’s National Early Childhood Agenda, reflecting DEST’s priority on early learning and development.

A cross section of participants was represented, predominantly from early childhood, medical and commercial sectors. Some Universities were also involved. Highlighted were practitioners involved in a range of ‘key early literacy projects’ (DEST, 2005c, p. 3), including people from overseas. Some practitioners participating in the Summit were tied in with commercial interests (e.g., the Dymocks Literacy Foundation); others were academics involved in conducting action research in parent/community programs to support children’s literacy learning; others were allied with community services such as the Centre for Community Child Health in Victoria, and philanthropic organisations (e.g., The Smith Family). Children’s authors, writers and consultants were also involved. Early childhood teachers, directors and librarians also attended and participated in presentations.

The kinds of literacy that were characterised at this Summit revolved around print-based books and reading aloud to children. Presentations identified the benefits of reading aloud to children, with texts that are engaging for young children and encourage interaction. Parents were seen to be an essential part of this read-aloud context, with an emphasis on imparting to parents how they might value and engage in read-aloud activities with their children, or involve them in read-aloud experiences provided in community settings such as libraries, health clinics and medical centres.

Research frameworks that came into play during the Summit involved both qualitative and quantitative methods. Extensive statistical analyses of the benefits of reading aloud to children and parental involvement in this activity were presented from written questionnaires, educational psychology studies, and medical research. Also presented were studies that used techniques associated with action research and ethnography; and which highlighted intimate portrayals of interactional processes, children’s participation, and parental issues, concerns and practices.

Emerging from this Summit was a clear and needed valuing of children’s early literacy experiences, with an emphasis on reading and print. The central issue that was foregrounded is that, while parents may acknowledge the importance of reading aloud to their children, many do not participate in sch activity in their homes. Hence the Summit was inaugurated as a form of advocacy for reading aloud to children across home and community settings, to
nurture children’s reading development and pave the way for enhancing children’s success as readers and literacy learners at school.

**Literacy Statement for Diocesan Systemic Schools (2003)**

The CLaSS project (Crevola and Hill, 1998) was instrumental in its focus on teaching literacy in the early years of schooling. The project was commissioned to inform policy developers and teachers of ‘best’ practice in classroom literacy experiences. The overall aim of the project was to ‘...assist schools to meet the new national literacy standard and to ensure that all students meet the standards within four years of commencing school’ (p. 11). The connection between this project and the 1997 Commonwealth literacy goal is clear. A long-term and sustainable model for early literacy teachers was presented through findings and recommendations. There was particular emphasis on improving literacy standards for all students through the incorporation of planned, systematic and explicit teaching of reading and writing. As such, this work became landmark in its explicit identification of ‘waves’ within the early years of school. What follows is a description of key findings reported within the project and the response to this as one region within the system worked to operationalise important aspects.

The connection between literacy and quality of life in our ‘...information-driven world’ (Crevola and Hill, 1998, p. 2) characterises the nature of literacy. The need for schools to assess the literacy development of students and report on this was a key driver to the project as ‘...life in modern society demands increasingly higher standards of literacy” (p. 2). Indeed, the underlying premise of the document is focused on supporting and promoting the literacy development of all learners within the classroom context. The focus region defined Literacy as the ‘...integration of listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing and critical thinking’ (Diocese of Wollongong, 2003a p. 2). Such literacies connect with those presented within the English K-6 Syllabus document (Board of Studies, 1998).

The design approach of the CLaSS project identified nine elements to be considered in the improvement and development of literacy practice within primary schools. These elements emerged from investigation into structured programs (for example, Western Australia’s First Steps, The Early Literacy In-Service Course and Victoria’s Keys to Life initiative) and the Reading Recovery intervention program (Clay, 1979, 1993). Trends within Australia and North America were also examined to ascertain ‘... best practice and findings from research into school and teacher
effectiveness’ (Crevola and Hill, 1998 p. 6). The design elements for improving literacy practice that emerged from this research include:

- Leadership and coordination
- Standards and targets
- Monitoring and assessment
- Classroom teaching programs
- Professional learning teams
- School and class organization
- Intervention and special assistance
- Home, school and community partnerships.

(Crevola and Hill, 1998, p. 7)

A series of ‘waves’ were identified in this report, the inclusion of which would accommodate all early literacy learners. The first of these waves is centred on teachers providing ‘good first teaching’. A range of classroom practices was promoted, including the daily two-hour literacy block with specific episodes to support the reading and writing development of students. Identified literacy based episodes included: reading to children, guided reading, shared reading, modelled writing, interactive writing and independent writing. There was considerable emphasis placed on the reading and writing language modes. The report described each episode, thus providing quite explicit guidelines and descriptors for teachers as to specific teacher behaviour and student behaviour within each named episode. Crevola and Hill (1998, p. 11) identify that such practice would support 80% of the students in their early years. Documented expectations from the focus region clearly draw these recommendations. An integrated programming approach, uninterrupted two-hour blocks of time, pre-determined assessment tools (namely Running Records, Observation Survey and analysis of student work product) and professional learning opportunities are identified as instructional frameworks to enable teachers to best respond to the challenge of literacy education. The region presents a key focus on the early years with the strong message that quality teaching in these years will support teachers and students in later years. Such expectation draws upon the design principles ‘classroom teaching programs’ and ‘monitoring and assessment’ (Crevola and Hill, 1998).

The focus region identifies a major professional learning initiative to support teachers in providing a balanced and comprehensive approach to literacy; namely the development and implementation of an ongoing system based professional learning course ‘Good First Teaching’. The Literacy Education Officer within the region developed the course in 1999, ‘...as one component in a systematic approach to improving literacy teaching and students’ literacy outcomes in diocesan primary schools’ (Catholic Education Office:
Diocese of Wollongong 2001:1) The professional learning experience draws upon the characteristics of quality teaching identified by Fountas and Pinnell (1999) and responds directly to recommendations within the CLaSS report (Crevola and Hill, 1998).

Should learners not be successful through ‘good first teaching’, the CLaSS report identifies another two waves to ensure all literacy learners are provided for. The next wave focused on intervention through the Reading Recovery program. This was identified as a way to support 98% of students in their early years. The Reading Recovery Program (Clay, 1993, 1979) was introduced to the focus region in 1994 and incorporated within all schools to support those students requiring ‘second wave’ support.

The final wave identified was further referral and special assistance aimed at supporting that 2% of children who had not been supported adequately through the first two waves. The articulation of this process was driven by the results from the National School English Literacy Survey that identified that around 30% of Year Three students ‘...are unable to perform at the level of the draft minimum or ‘benchmark’ [literacy] standard’ (Crevola and Hill, 1998, p. 10-11).

This is an example of how one system responded to research findings and an associated report. The focus region identified a number of issues to do with literacy education that emerged from the report, and responded to these through the development of professional learning mechanisms and support for teachers. In particular issues around planning for meaningful literacy experiences and providing for these in classroom contexts were promoted. Further, the need to support all students and associated processes for this were articulated and provided for with the inclusion of Reading Recovery within all schools. This response is one that advocates the active participation of teachers in their professional learning to best support early literacy learners.

Visions of literacy education that are encapsulated for the future are explicit through both the CLaSS report (Crevola and Hill, 1998) and the profiled response to this one region. The analysis of each of these presents the vision that literacy teaching needs to be inclusive, planned and meaningful for students with real focus on reading and writing. Further, the need for teachers to be supported to do this through ongoing professional learning was promoted. This is an example of how research findings may be operationalised within both policy and practice as practitioners make sense of the implications research presents for actual classroom practice.
Conclusions

Across the materials interrogated in this paper, a strong commitment to children's literacy learning emerges. There is a clear valuing of literacy and emphasis on the need for all children to be literate in order to effectively participate in educational, economic, and sociocultural contexts in our society.

In supporting children's literacy learning, partnership emerges as another thread of continuity across these materials. These partnerships involve home/school partnerships. There is also recognition of diversity, which is highly relevant to the development of these partnerships. This recognition, however, occurs to varying degrees – while the five year archive of AJLL, for example, provides considerable coverage, the 'Teaching Reading Report' acknowledges diversity but with an imperative to focus on the 'what' and 'how' of reading instruction.

On the question of 'how' and 'what', and where 'who' really fits into the picture, tensions emerge across the materials. In contrast to the 'Teaching Reading' Report, considerable space is given in the AJLL archive for providing an evidence base for understanding the functioning of children as literacy learners in their many variegated contexts. The ClaSS Project and the Diocesan Literacy Statement also provide a strong base for catering to the needs of individual children, through the waves it proposes for meeting and assessing needs. There is a sense in these particular documents of contextualising needs assessment in terms of inclusive and meaningful classroom experiences, with teachers bringing knowledge of children's backgrounds and development to bear.

Tensions around instructional approaches also emerge in terms of degree of specification and prescription. The AJLL articles tend to be broad in their implications and recommendations. The Read Aloud Summit is highly focused on a particular kind of learning experience and particular form of reading. The 'Teaching Reading' Report makes clear its advocacy for basic, systematic and direct instruction that is highly structured and sequential in its planning and implementation. The Class Project and Diocesan Literacy Statement outline a two-hour literacy block as the keystone of effective instruction, and indicate the kinds of activities and strategies to be used therein, which contextualise and include but are not confined to basic skills.

In regard to what constitutes 'reading' and 'literacy', discrepancies emerge between narrow and broad characterisations of reading and literacy, and the contextualisation of these portrayals in children's present and future home, community, societal and economic contexts.

Approaches to researching literacy are also in contention across the materials investigated in this paper. What constitutes
‘evidence’ and rigorous research is highly specified in the ‘Teaching Reading’ Report, which selects and prioritises a particular paradigm while marginalizing and excluding others. In contrast, the AJJLL archive sees debates turned into discussions, with a call for dialogue and recontextualisation of research dichotomies as continua of approaches (Mills, 2005).

Concern with inclusion and exclusion of particular research approaches aligns with inclusion/exclusion of participants in the development of literacy agendas, policies and research. The National Literacy Inquiry was broad in its open invitation and the submissions it subsequently received. This breadth appears to have been seriously countered by the more narrow approach to the inquiry’s literature review; and there is a sense in which the breadth on which the Report might have stood was undermined as a result.

This counterpoint provides one explanation for contradictions that appear in the Report. For example, the Report acknowledges the need to cater for children from diverse backgrounds. Yet, at the same time, the Report advocates approaches that it explicitly defines as focusing on ‘how’ and ‘what’ is to be taught rather than ‘whom’. Another example concerns the Report’s recommendation for home/school partnerships that are based on and sensitive to children’s home experiences. This recommendation implicates the need for understanding contexts and interactions in children’s home settings, such as is provided by qualitative, ethnographic and observational forms. Yet, the Report explicitly marginalises such research.

Practices of exclusion and polarisation, rather than serve the goals of literacy education for all children, undermine these goals in alienating resources at our disposal. Teachers are alienated, too. Teachers prefer not to engage in debates and oppositions, instead doing what works for particular children at a particular time by drawing on repertoires of various teaching approaches, strategies and materials (Broadley et al, 2000; Johnson, 2002).

**Discussion**

The materials subjected to interrogative analysis in this paper all carry value for teachers, researchers and policy makers in the concerns and commitment they share to literacy education. However, in our enthusiasm to ‘do better’ for ‘all children’, we must be careful not to become overly zealous and discard what we know and have learned, and continue to learn, about reading and literacy. At a time when literacy is high on Australia’s national agenda – a reality reflected overseas – this is not the time to alienate all the resources we have at our disposal to improve literacy learning for all.
How, for example, might we cater to diverse needs among children, as recommended in the ‘Teaching Reading’ Report, if we don’t draw on research that provides rich and in-depth portrayals of children’s literacy learning and practices in and across diverse settings? This research is case study and ethnographic in nature, and if we exclude such research from the nation’s agenda, then the understandings it continues to generate will become lost to us as teachers, as researchers, as policy developers – and in the quest for prioritising ‘what’ and ‘how’ over ‘who’, children are diminished as a result.

Inclusion emerges as a key issue when cross-analysing these materials. Whose voices are heard, whose voices are not, and whose voices are explicitly excluded from the discussion that is turned into a debate? These are critical questions if we are to move to enhancing the nexus between research, teaching and policy to the ultimate benefit of children and their literacy learning.

Questions of power and whose voices hold sway are equally important. From an insider’s perspective, Luke (2003b, p. 98) confirms, that policy formation ‘entails a far more arbitrary play of discourse and truth, power and knowledge’ than any application of theory and evidence.

At the outset, the National Literacy Inquiry invited voices of one and all who felt they had a stake and a view to express. What appears to have eventuated, however, is that these voices have been polarised, and some marginalised and excluded, in the recontextualisation that followed in the ‘Teaching Reading’ Report. There is a need to take stock of these voices once again, as we move to developing an inclusive literacy agenda that meets the needs of children and is inclusive of all key stakeholders and participants. These voices need to speak to one another in a common vocabulary, and come to some common, broad-based understanding about a mutually shared set of strategies that provide for repertoires of practices (Luke, 2003a), to ensure inclusive and effective meeting of individual student needs.

In this dialogue, Ladwig’s (1996) critical realist approach to educational research suggests conversation between research paradigms. With a broadening of the conceptualisation of ‘evidence based research’, research is characterised in terms of continua of research approaches, rather than in terms of discrete and competing entities. It is not the case that any one approach is ‘better ‘than others; rather, each approach needs to be appraised in terms of its sense of ‘fitness’ for the research needs at hand.

An inclusive literacy agenda needs to be based on inclusive characterisations of literacy and reading. If children are to be equipped to ‘engage productively’ as ‘Australia’s most valuable resources’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 7), the approaches for teaching
reading and literacy need to take stock of the kinds of literacy repertoires children need to develop – such as those well documented in the five year archive of AJLL and elsewhere; and which include 'real' reading and writing, as argued by the ClaSS Project and the Literacy Statement for Diocesan Schools.

Future Directions of the “Nexus Project’

This collaborative project is now moving into its next phase. This phase involves teachers, researchers, teacher educators, policy makers and employer groups across prior-to-school, primary school and secondary school settings in publicly funded and private sectors. Interviews will be conducted, focal group discussions will be held, and document analyses undertaken. A meta-analysis of research literature will continue, and encompass material overseas. National reports and policy statements will continue to be examined, as begun in this paper.

Investigating and documenting multiple perspectives, we argue, are necessary to dialogue being engendered and voices being heard. Ultimately, agendas, policies and practices related to literacy education should best serve the interests of children – and be genuinely and inclusively developed in their names.

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