Conversations across borders: interactions between literacy research, policy and practice

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Abstract
This discussion paper critically examines the nexus of literacy research, policy and practice from two key theoretical perspectives – frame analysis and sensemaking theory.

The nexus of literacy research, policy and practice is problematic and conversations and ongoing dialogue based on understanding the complex ways in which these three fields interact are much needed. Driven by this concern, the Literacies Research Initiative team at the University of Wollongong initiated an inquiry into the nexus of literacy research, policy and practice (Harris, Derewianka, Chen, Fitzsimmons, Kervin, Turbill, Cruickshank, McKenzie & Konza, 2006). This paper explores this nexus from two key theoretical perspectives used in this inquiry: frame analysis (Goffman, 1974) and sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). Frame analysis and sensemaking theory work synergistically together to illuminate the three fields and the interactions among them; and elucidate directions for conversations and issues that might be explored. The purpose of this discussion is twofold: to provoke thinking and dialogue about the issues that it presents; and to identify ways that this nexus might be enhanced by conversations between the three fields.

Frame analysis
Originating from the work of Erving Goffman (1974), frame analysis concerns itself with the organisation of experience. Of particular relevance to understanding the nexus of literacy research, policy and practice is the use of frames through which ideas are produced and people are entreated to take action. Frames refer to 'schemata of
interpretation’ through which individuals or groups ‘locate, perceive, identify, and label’ events and phenomena’ (Goffman, 1974, p21).

Frame analysis is particularly pertinent to understanding policy development and its relationship to practice and research. For the purposes of this paper, ‘policy’ is defined as documents of legislation and regulation that are intended to govern practice. ‘Policy’ is distinct from ‘policy messages’, which concern what is conveyed about policy through means such as press releases, newsletters, forums, debates, professional development sessions and conferences.

In policy development, frames are used strategically to invoke a particular idea and accomplish desired action. For example, a central frame of the recent policy reform document, *Teaching Reading* (DEST, 2005), is the idea of literacy success for ‘all children’. The merit and inclusivity of this idea is undeniable among literacy educators and strongly appeals to parents and other key stakeholders in children’s education. The implications of this salient frame, however, transcend its obvious merit and appeal. It strategically positions the authors and associates of the proposed policy reforms as benefactors or ‘heroes’ – in much the same way as Lakoff (2003) argues that the frame ‘tax relief’ positions politicians as ‘heroes’ who will free their constituency from tax burdens; or the Federal government in Australia used ‘work choices’ to frame industrial relations and workplace reforms. In so doing, the ‘all children’ frame is ironically anything but inclusive, as will be explored below.

**Problematisation and representation in frame analysis**

From the standpoint of frame analysis, policy development is conceived as an act of problematisation, particularly in the context of policy reform:

‘Policy problems do not exist as a social fact awaiting discovery. Rather, these problems are socially constructed as policymakers and constituents identify and interpret some aspect of the social world as problematic.’ (Coburn, 2006, p343)
The problematisation of literacy by policy reformers is a case in point. The recent *Teaching Reading* Report (DEST, 2005a) and its related documents have explicitly problematised literacy and the efficacy of reading instruction for ‘all children’, citing data on poor literacy standards. This problematisation is not neutral – its implications further position the authors and associates of the proposed reform as the ‘heroes’ who will rescue the situation, while positioning those responsible for the status quo as the ‘villains’.

Once a phenomenon has been problematised, representation of the problem is significant yet inevitably incomplete, given the complex nature of social phenomena in our world (Weiss, 1989). The *Teaching Reading* Report, for example, highlights certain aspects of the situation while de-emphasising or ignoring others. In so doing, the report aligns itself with other recent reports (e.g. de Lemos, 2002; Ellis, 2005) that share a similar worldview. Together, these reports overtly adopt a narrow approach to literacy that prioritises:

- Reading at the expense of writing, multiliteracies and the relationship between reading and writing;
- Beginning reading at the expense of literacy development throughout the school years;
- Decoding skills at the expense of a more comprehensive view of literacy that includes making meaning, using texts for social purposes, critical literacy and diverse contexts in which literacy is learned and used; and
- Students with decoding difficulties at the expense of students with no such problems or with literacy problems that fall outside decoding practices (Turbill, 2006).

The *Teaching Reading* Report acknowledges the four reading resources model (Luke and Freebody, 1999) that has been widely adopted in Australia and which provides a comprehensive account of reading practices that includes but is not limited to decoding practices. However, the Report marginalises the model by alleging its ‘lack of supporting evidence-based research’ (DEST, 2005b, p25), overlooking the extensive research literature review on which this model was based and continues to be developed. The Report’s critique significantly recontextualises the
model by juxtaposing it against the ‘evidence’ the Report cites on the primacy of decoding skills for learning to read and the lack of teachers’ expertise in teaching these skills. In so doing, the Report is brought back into its preferred frame of reading as basic skills (phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies) and teaching as ‘direct instruction’.

Representation of constructivist approaches likewise is incomplete and oversimplified. The Report aligns Vygotsky, Piaget and whole language approaches under the umbrella term of constructivism and solely interprets the constructivist view of the teacher as a ‘facilitator of learning rather than a director’ (DEST, 2005a, p29). Yet, a Vygotskian perspective portrays the teacher as expert and instructor who explicitly and systematically leads children in educational dialogue – the teacher is not merely a facilitator (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Indeed, profound differences on this matter exist between Vygotskian and Piagetian perspectives on learning and development – differences overlooked in the Teaching Reading Report, to the detriment of acknowledging the contributions of different constructivist approaches to understanding teaching/learning processes and the research base on which such approaches stand. This incompleteness aids the problematisation of the very approaches that the Report rejects.

**Three kinds of problem framing processes**

The way a policy problem is framed is significant not only in terms of its completeness and accuracy, but also because it “assigns responsibility … and creates rationales that authorize some policy solutions and not others” (Coburn, 2006, p344). There are three processes involved in problem framing.

One kind of framing is diagnostic framing that involves policymakers in defining problems and attributing blame (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1992). As explored above, this kind of framing tends to be incomplete, given the complexity of social phenomena, and not altogether neutral as worldviews and agendas come into play. In the Teaching Reading Report, the problem of failing literacy standards is attributed to practices that allegedly are not ‘evidence-based’ – in particular, constructivist approaches. Consequently such approaches are
negatively framed and their removal from classroom practices is explicitly recommended.

A second kind of framing is prognostic framing that involves proposing solution/s to the problem that include goals and strategies (Benford & Snow, 2000; Cress & Snow, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1992). The Teaching Reading Report (DEST, 2005a), for example, identifies 20 recommendations that are clustered under evidence-based approaches to teaching reading; role of parents; school leadership and management; standards for teaching; assessment; preparation of teachers; and ongoing professional development. A recurring frame for these solutions is evidence-based practices, specifically direct instruction – and the call for teacher education and professional development to be based on the same.

A third kind of framing is motivational framing that serves as a call to arms (Snow & Benford, 1992). The Teaching Reading Report’s literature review (DEST, 2005b) comprises part of this motivational framing – providing a rationale for action. Yet this review is carefully and selectively constructed. Criteria for the selection of literature are identified stating that the review ‘summarises key findings from evidence-based research’ (DEST, 2005b, p16) that the Report defines as:

the application of rigorous, objective methods to obtain valid answers to clearly specified questions … 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, p85).

The recurring use of the ‘all children’ frame adds motivational weight, too, in calling on educators to ensure that no child is left behind, to invoke a similar frame from the Teaching Reading report’s US counterpart, the No Child Left Behind Act (US Congress, 2002).
**Consequences of problem framing**

How a problem is framed validates some courses of action and not others (Coburn, 2006). For example, in the *Teaching Reading* Report, research and pedagogies (e.g. code-based direct instruction) that fall within the ‘evidence based’ frame are validated, while research and pedagogies (e.g. whole language and constructivist approaches) that fall outside this frame are explicitly invalidated.

Further consequences of problem framing in regard to authorisation of people to carry out solutions are brought into question – for example:

- What individuals and groups are authorised to lead, inform and monitor solutions, as opposed to those for whom it is mandated that they enact the solutions?
- Through what means, and how overtly/covertly?
- What are the consequences for cohesion of literacy education and interactions within and amongst literacy research, policy and practice?

This last question does not concern itself with all speaking as one voice – intellectual tensions and multiple perspectives are beneficial for literacy education, particularly when they lead to re-examining our own positions and strengthening our arguments (Freebody, 2005). What is a concern, however, is the disquiet that results when policy framing polarises people and sees players jostling for position, voice and funding. Texts that polarise and dichotomise literacy education undermine connections between literacy research, policy and practice: teachers do not necessarily view literacy instruction in such terms and do not engage with dichotomies that have resurfaced in current proposed policy reforms (Harris, 2006; Broadley et al., 2000; Johnson, 2002; Mills, 2005).

Contestation, of course, is an inevitable consequence of policy. Counterframes can and do emerge, which provide alternative portrayals of the situation and its solutions, along with different implications for roles, responsibilities and resources (Benford & Snow, 2000). Such disputes can give rise to reframing, however, the extent to which frames can be negotiated is shaped by structures of power and authority.
Aligning frames and evoking resonance

Given the ever-present spectre of contestation and the need to mobilise policy implementation, it is not surprising that policymakers work to align their frames with the interests, values and beliefs of those they seek to take action (Benford & Snow, 2000). The Teaching Reading Report’s use of an ‘evidence-based research’ frame is a case in point. Its definition and privileging of evidence-based research, as previously cited, resonates with other recent reports on literacy in Australia (e.g. de Lemos, 2002, Ellis, 2005) and overseas (e.g. ‘No Child Left Behind’, 2002) – thereby aligning the Teaching Reading Report with these other reports. Moreover, this research definition is aligned with particular definitions of literacy that focus on basic reading skills and exclude other aspects of reading and literacy, as previously seen in this paper. In proceeding with this frame to put forward recommendations for evidence-based practices, alternative research paradigms are delegitimised and so, too, are associated classroom practices aligned with such research.

Indeed, the power of alignment rests in its ability to not only marshal and empower people and resources in desired directions but also to weaken those associated with undesirable directions. For example, this paper previously highlighted an apparent confusion in the Teaching Reading Report, between Vygotskian and Piagetian approaches that are grouped under the same heading of constructivist approaches to teaching – mistakenly assigning the Piagetian notion of ‘teacher as facilitator’ to a Vygotskian approach. Yet, this so-called confusion has the effect of aligning undesirable approaches together so that they may be collectively knocked down – even if the perceived faults (e.g. teacher as a facilitator) do not apply in each case.

However, frame alignment is only as effective as the degree to which a frame resonates with individuals and mobilises them into action (Williams & Kubal, 1999). While the texts of current policy reform, such as the Teaching Reading report, clearly align with particular groups of researchers and practitioners who share similar views, they do not align with other groups who also have a contribution to make to reform – such as researchers whose work in other paradigms reveal rich and complex insights into key matters such as the diversity of children’s
literacy experiences and implications for practices in catering to diverse needs at school.

Nor do current policy reform texts necessarily align with the ultimate audience of such reforms – teachers who are to put proposed changes into place. Indeed, when policymakers single-mindedly advocate particular methods for ‘all children’ and exclude others, they fail to take stock of teachers’ perspectives (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001; Kamler & Comber, 2004). Teachers commonly are concerned with implementing practices that they find work for their students (Anstey & Bull, 2003) as opposed to ‘all children’. In so doing, teachers typically draw on a broad range of instructional practices.

Such choices by teachers have been dismissed by current reform documents as the Teaching Reading Report that states:

‘Many teaching approaches used in schools are not informed by findings from evidence-based research, and that too many teachers do not have a clear understanding of why, how, what and when to use particular strategies’ (DEST, 2005a, p14).

The criticism of teachers’ competences notwithstanding, exhaustive and inclusive reviews of the research literature have revealed that no reading research has uncovered literacy pedagogies that work for ‘all children’ (Allington & Johnston, 2001).

The effectiveness of frame alignment in current policy reform documents is also brought into question in regard to groups and individuals who mediate teachers’ policy implementation. These people include non-system actors such as researchers, teacher educators, professional development providers, professional associations and publishers. These groups have been found to have significant impact on ways in which teachers interpret and implement policy:

On the one hand … many non-system actors have a greater capacity than policy actors to reach teachers in ways that are substantive, sustained, and situated in their day-to-day work in the classroom. On the other hand, non-system actors … tend to transform messages as they carry them to teachers. As a result non-system actors are a powerful yet not entirely
controllable mechanism for reaching teachers. (Coburn, 2005, pp44–45).

Key questions that arise from this discussion of frame alignment and resonance include:

- In what ways are the frames of current policy reforms designed to try to align with the values, interests and beliefs of teachers, researchers, professional development providers and literacy consultants?
- To what degree do these frames resonate with these individuals and groups and why?
- To what extent do these frames create dissonance, with whom and why?

Considering questions like these brings us into the realm of sensemaking – a key factor that mediates between policy and practice, as explored below.

**Sensemaking theory**

Arising from the seminal work of Weick (1995), sensemaking theory is concerned with the interpersonal interaction and dialogue with messages from the environment through which understandings, norms and routines are socially constructed. People’s actions are based on how individuals notice and interpret information in their environment – such as policy messages in a teacher’s school environment. Sensemaking theory thus positions teachers’ interpretations as a critical factor that mediates between policy and practice. This theory recognises, too, that teachers’ interpretations are influenced by their worldviews and practices that, in turn, are rooted in a teacher’s history of connections with and responses to past messages from the institutional environment (Coburn, 2006).

Drawing on sensemaking theory, there are four key factors that shape teachers’ response to and implementation of policy and related messages:

- Congruence in terms of teachers’ perceptions of correspondence between the message and their own world views and pre-existing practice;
Intensity in terms of the degree to which teachers have opportunities to engage with the message in sustained ways;

Pervasiveness in terms of the degree to which teachers encounter messages and/or pressure in multiple and overlapping ways; and

Voluntariness in terms of the degree to which messages are stating recommendations or mandating that certain actions be done (Coburn, 2004).

Sensemaking and framing in the field of practice

There is a deep complementarity between sensemaking and frame analysis that further illuminates the policy/practice relationship. According to Klein, Moon and Hoffman (2006), sensemaking involves both fitting data into a frame and fitting a frame around the data. Just as policy makers select frames through which they produce ideas and entreat people to take action, so too do teachers use frames to make choices about their implementation of policy. The question thus arises: What frames does a teacher draw on?

To explore this question, consider the case study of one teacher, Sandra (a pseudonym), whom I observed in her Kindergarten classroom for one year. Sandra worked in a metropolitan school, where a high percentage of students were from Chinese backgrounds. The large majority of Sandra’s students were new arrivals from China, having been raised by grandparents in their prior-to-school years. These children’s needs included acclimatising to a new sociocultural setting; learning English as a second language; and making the transition into school where behavioural expectations, social experiences and ways of learning differed substantially from their previous experiences.

Sandra’s literacy instruction fell into two broad categories. One category consisted of core practices, which were undertaken on a daily basis; they included modelled reading with the whole class, guided reading with levelled readers in reading groups, and home readers. Sandra’s school setting and its established norms and routines for literacy learning in the early years largely determined these practices. The second category consisted of Sandra’s non-core practices, which supported the core literacy program but were given less priority in terms of teaching time,
resources and assessment focus. These practices included experiences such as drama, cooking and free play. Despite their less frequent occurrence in her classroom, these experiences were amongst Sandra’s preferred practices for teaching literacy and resonated most strongly with her teaching philosophy and beliefs about children’s literacy learning.

Myriad and often conflicting texts converged on what Smith and Lovatt (2003) would refer to as her operational space. These texts formed a complex network of intertextual frames through which Sandra deliberated on, selected and prioritised her literacy instructional practices. Specifically, these texts and frames were:

- Sandra’s teaching philosophy – ‘This is what I believe and value’ text, framed by an emphasis on children’s enjoyment of learning, motivation, happiness, meaningfulness of teaching/learning experiences, engagement, learning through cooperation and interactions in group settings. This frame shaped Sandra’s written statement of her philosophy in her program, as well as her general approach to the children.

- Mandatory NSW English K–6 Syllabus (Board of Studies NSW, 1998) – ‘This is what children should be learning’ text, framed by specific learning outcomes that direct instructional foci and are criteria for assessment at particular stages of schooling. This frame shaped instructional priorities and choices in Sandra’s literacy program.

- Parents’ expectations – ‘Moving up and getting ahead’ text, framed by parents’ expectations and requests conveyed in conversations with the teacher, for structured homework, levelled home readers, with aspirations for seeing their children move up to the next reading level and positioning children for school success, later life chances and career opportunities.

- Kindergarten teachers’ collective conversations and practices – ‘This is what we can do’ text, framed by the teachers’ alliances of solidarity in the face of resource shortages and challenges presented by tensions among resource availability, mandatory outcomes, children’s needs and parents’ expectations.

- Children’s words and actions, making up myriad ‘This is me’ texts, framed by children’s ways of behaving and interacting
with others, their interests, achievements, struggles, predispositions, resources, with recurring predispositions towards solitary pursuits and technical excellence that were overtly nurtured by their parents.

- School values – ‘This is what we stand for’ text, manifest, for example, in written school policies on school values and how they were to be upheld, framed by appreciation of diversity, focus on home-school partnerships, and a formalised Home Reading Program.

- Direct instruction – ‘This is what needs to be taught and how’ text, framed by systematic teacher-directed instruction of material, broken down into small and sequential steps, monitoring student understanding and eliciting their successful participation, and assessing measurable outcomes. This was particularly manifest in the Reading Recovery Program and Benchmark Kits, implemented through guided reading of levelled readers in ability-based reading groups and assessment through running records.

- Developmentally appropriate practices – ‘This is who I am teaching’ text, framed by child-centred instruction, facilitating children’s learning through practices that are matched to the child’s age-indicated developmental needs, their individual needs and interests and sociocultural backgrounds. This was manifest in Sandra’s inclusion of play, cooking and drama as vehicles of literacy learning.

- Learning through interactions and shared understanding – ‘This is what we think and mean’ text framed by assisting children’s learning through negotiating shared understandings and scaffolding children’s participation in their zone of proximal development, between their actual and potential capabilities.

- Socialisation into school – ‘These are the social resources needed at school’ text framed by the view that learning at school involves functioning in group settings and learning to share, cooperate, take turns, consider others and listen to one another. This was manifest in Sandra’s interactions with children where she emphasised these social aspects of their behaviour.
These frames were mobilised in the face of the realities Sandra faced – for example, the resources and predispositions of children that focused on solitary pursuits mobilised a ‘socialisation into school’ frame through which she focused on group learning and cooperation. Both consistency and contradiction existed amongst these frames – for example, the ‘developmentally appropriate’ frame was at odds with the ‘direct instruction’ frame, but congruent with the ‘teacher’s philosophy’ frame. Such is the complexity of teaching. Through these various frames, Sandra continued to negotiate her complex classroom realities and implemented curriculum policy in ways that ‘made sense’ in her situation – as teachers do when they deliberate on matters of policy implementation.

Sandra is not atypical. Teachers constantly engage with and transform messages from policy and research as well as from key informants and data sources in their setting – not least of all, the children they teach (Broadley et al., 2000; Coburn, 2001; Johnson, 2002). In so doing, teachers build and produce professional knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In this, their professional judgment is critical (Pearson, 2003).

On interpreting and implementing policy, Coburn (2001), in her indepth study of reading policy reform in California, unearthed findings that strongly resonate with Sandra’s experiences:

- Teachers construct their understandings through their interactions with colleagues, in both formal and informal settings. Sandra’s interactions with her colleagues, particularly her Kindergarten colleagues, were a vital part of the choices she made, and provided a means through which she filtered and reconciled messages from various frames about teaching approaches and materials.
- As teachers continue to work closely together, their worldviews and practices tend to converge as they develop shared understandings. Sandra and herKindergarten colleagues clearly had developed a like-mindedness about their instructional practices that had a strong connection with their perceived need for solidarity in the face of challenges they faced (such as the
need to share readers on a rotational basis across their classrooms, as there were not enough materials for each classroom at the same time).

- Teachers’ professional communities play a gate-keeping role in filtering myriad and often conflicting policy messages. Sandra and her colleagues, for example, made choices about what aspects of the NSW *English K–6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1998) they would prioritise with their Kindergarten children.

- Various factors account for teachers’ judgment about how to implement policy. These include relevance to the grade level a teacher is teaching; difficulty level for the children being taught; philosophical opposition; perceived inappropriateness; lack of ‘fit’ with existing classroom structures and practices; and teachers’ sense of their own lack of understanding. These were all key considerations for Sandra, too.

- Negotiating technical and practical details are part and parcel of teachers implementing policy in their classrooms – putting their policy interpretations into action was far from straightforward. Teachers negotiated details with colleagues on how to put abstract ideas into practice. This negotiation saw various considerations come into play – for example, how to use aspects of a textbook series in the context of the teacher’s program; timing, format and record keeping for assessment; grouping students; and what kind of paper to use for a particular activity. Ultimately, the choices teachers made were shaped by their worldviews, pre-existing practices and structural constraints at the school level. In Sandra’s case, the need to rotate an inadequate supply of reading materials around the Kindergarten classrooms was one such ongoing practical consideration; as was Sandra’s negotiation of timing and balance so she could incorporate play, cooking and drama in her literacy program.

- School principals also influenced teachers’ enactments of policy. They did so by shaping access to policy ideas; participating in the social process of interpretation and adaptation; and creating substantively different conditions for teacher learning in schools. These actions in turn are influenced
by principals’ understandings about reading instruction and teacher learning. A key influence from Sandra’s school principal was an emphasis on home-school partnerships and the Home Reading Program based on levelled readers. This emphasis was a support in some ways for Sandra, enabling her to work to meet parents’ expectations for children’s reading. At the same time, tensions arose as parents were ever-keen to see children move up in the levelled readers they took home.

As teachers such as Sandra draw on different frames to make sense of policy and shape their practice, they may be likened to what Lévi-Strauss (1974) called bricoleurs. Defined as individuals who use materials at hand to create new structures from “limited possibilities” (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p21), teachers make choices from possibilities and options that they see available (Smith-Lovatt, 2003). They improvise and assemble class literacy programs from available resources and ideas. As they do, they may adapt ideas through processes of addition, deletion, substitution and transposition – all processes that make up the practice of bricolage (Nöth, 1990). In so doing, teachers have a pivotal role in the judgments they make and the decisions they enact as they interpret and implement policy.

Identifying lines of conversation
Frame analysis and sensemaking theory illuminate processes and issues related to the nexus of research, policy and practice; they also provide a basis for identifying some strategies for enhancing the nexus. These strategies are identified below in terms of directions for conversations with and amongst researchers, policymakers and teachers, along with issues that might be explored.

One such direction concerns policymakers and researchers tuning in to what teachers say about policy – the messages they notice, how they interpret them, and where/how teachers access policy and related messages. Teachers’ reasons behind the choices they make when implementing policy in their classrooms is worthy of authentic dialogue between teachers, researchers and policymakers. Such conversations would do well, too, to tune into the gate-keeping choices that teachers make when deciding what messages from research and policy they
choose to incorporate and what to exclude; details teachers find
themselves negotiating on their own and with other teachers on ways of
putting policy into practice; and factors that influence teachers’ actions,
including their worldviews, pre-existing practices, shared understandings,
structural constraints and classroom realities that they develop with their
colleagues.

A second direction for conversation concerns connections with
research. While policymakers are currently urging teachers to use
evidence-based practices, exactly what does ‘evidence-based’ mean and
to whom? Current reform documents such as *Teaching Reading* define
such research as empirical quantitative inquiry, yet this is not a view or
an approach shared by everyone in literacy education. Avenues to
explore in conversations within and amongst the fields of literacy
research, policy and practice include: Whose definitions of evidence-
based research hold sway and why? What other forms of research should
be admissible for informing policy and practice? What research messages
do teachers notice and select? How do teachers access research and
how? What ways (if any) do teachers implement research in their
classrooms? Similar issues arise, too, for teachers’ connections with
research as they do for policy: gate-keeping choices teachers exercise
when it comes to including or ignoring messages from research; details
they negotiate on their own and with other teachers; and factors
influencing their interpretations and enactments of research messages.

Another direction concerns teachers’ interactions with colleagues about
policy and research interpretation and implementation, in formal and
informal settings, and the degree to which collaborative cultures are
created in teachers’ settings to support interpretation and
implementation of research and policy. These are conversations that
occur on a day-to-day basis and have a significant role in shaping
teachers’ choices and understandings. Teachers’ social networks are of
interest too, as is the role of executive in policy reform leadership.

Another course for discussion focuses on the role of school executive
staff in providing access to policy and to research. Issues that such
conversations could explore include: what gets privileged and why; how
are collaborative cultures for interpreting and enacting policy and
research created; what opportunities are provided for teachers to develop understandings and pathways for implementing policy a research; how are these experiences structured; and how do executive staff frame messages about policy and research policy messages and research messages in ways that shape interpretations and mobilise actions.

Tuning into perspectives among policymakers, conversation could explore influences on their work, such as their worldviews, pre-existing practices and structural constraints; policymakers’ professional conversations and social networks and how these influence their policy work; policymakers’ interpretations of research and ‘research messages’; their gate-keeping choices about what research to put in or leave out in the documents they produce; and their role in creating collaborative cultures to support policy implementation in ways that ‘make sense’. It would also be fruitful to understand how policymakers go about framing problems under focus: the means by which they come to understand a problem exists or there is a need for policy reform; the frames they choose to represent a problem and its solutions; and how they position these frames to align with the values, belief and interest of their projected audience.

Non-system actors play a significant role in the nexus of literacy research, policy and practice — teacher educators, researchers, consultants, professional associations and professional development providers. Bringing these groups into the conversation, lines of discussion could explore issues of resonance and dissonance with current policy documents and reforms, and alternative ways they see for portraying problems and solutions under focus. In exploring these alternative frames, implications for roles, resources and responsibilities could be discussed; as could be individuals’ and groups’ sense of the degree to which they feel they can negotiate and inform policy in light of extant power and authority structures.

In closing
Framing and sensemaking are processes that take time and involve interactions among people. Clearly, policymakers engage in framing
processes as they recontextualise research and align their frames with others of like minds and worldviews. Teachers, too, engage in framing and collective sensemaking as they make sense of how to put policy into action in their classrooms, against the backdrop of their worldviews, pre-existing practices, structural constraints and classrooms realities.

What continues to be needed are conversations between literacy research, policy and practice, and between groups within each of these fields. Avenues that could be explored in these conversations have been suggested and are being pursued in our own project (Harris et al., 2006), with a view to sustaining authentic dialogue over time.

The goal of such dialogue is not to reach consensus – if it was, it would be a futile, naïve and even counter-productive goal. Rather, the goal ideally is to inform and enrich our perspectives of literacy education by tuning into others’ points of views, especially those who have opposing views and ideas, or who work in quite different fields and situations from our own. At a time when policy reformers are erecting border-patrols that allow some groups and individuals ‘in’ and keep others ‘out’ of the research/policy/practice nexus, it appears imperative to traverse the borders that divide literacy education and engage in dialogue in ways that authentically and collectively ‘make sense’.

References


