The Teacher's Role in the Research-Policy-Praxis Nexus — **Source link** ↗

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The Teacher's Role in the Research-Policy-Praxis Nexus

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Abstract

What kinds of relationships exist between educational policy, research and the professional knowledge of the teachers that implement these policies in practice? This article reports research that examined the role of teachers working in an environment formed by links between research, policy and practice. By adopting a contextual focus upon the Victorian Early Years Literacy Program, its research and teachers who implement the program, the study analysed how early years reading is being constructed. Critical issues are identified about the impact of policy and research upon the teaching profession and the links that are present in the research–policy–praxis nexus.

Introduction

The research–policy–praxis nexus (RPPN), a term coined by Seddon (2000), describes the notion that a relationship exists between research, policy and practice. This nexus forms the environment in which institutionalised education is developed and exercised. In the government education sector, the RPPN plays a significant role in defining what should be taught and learned in schools, who should learn it, how it should be taught and why. It is therefore valuable to periodically subject aspects of the RPPN to 'critical review' and 'appraisal' as a means of increasing knowledge and understanding about the nature and effectiveness of its current operation. The nature of the RPPN should be of interest to all who are concerned with education from all sectors and from the research, policy and practical arenas.

This paper draws upon doctoral research that examined teachers' roles in the RPPN in relation to constructions of reading in the early years of schooling. It examines the way that reading and the teaching of beginning reading have been conceptualised and portrayed in the Victorian Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP), international research and by teachers in the primary school who implement it. The study identifies teachers' roles in the RPPN and highlights problematic issues that need to be dealt with to ensure the continuing improvement of teaching and learning in schools. Before proceeding with this focus it is important to review relevant literature on teacher research, policy research and discourse analysis to provide an understanding of the complex issues that framed and contextualised this study.
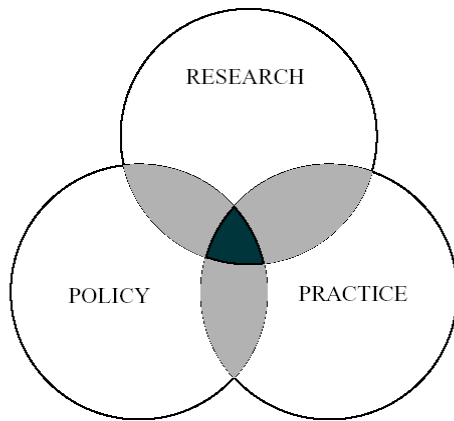
figure 1.1 The Research - Policy - Praxis Nexus (Seddon 2000)

Teacher Research

There is widespread support for the argument that teachers have previously been silenced in research and the media (Goodson, 2003; Perkins & Davidson,2001) and that there is a need for further research on teachers as they play a central role in educating students in schools. Ironically, 'the teachers' perspective has been missing from efforts at research, development, reform, curriculum implementation and change during the last twenty-five or more years' (Butt et al., 1992,p. 51).

Over the last decade quality research in the field has responded to this concern and chosen to listen to the voices of teachers (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly 1995; Goodson & Hargraves, 1996).This growing body of teacher research explores the professional knowledge and practice of the teacher (Dinham & Scott, 2000) specifically highlighting and describing complexities and issues that teachers deal with within their professional lives as they work within the RPPN (Goodson & Hargraves 1996, Clandinin & Connelly 1995).This research strongly advocates the importance of the role of teachers arguing that 'after all, it is the teachers who ultimately hold the key to the success of the educational enterprise and it is surely time that we began to see the world of schooling from their view point' (Goodson & Hargraves, 1996, p. 24).

Teachers' stories, narratives and life accounts are recognised as important research forms by which teachers' voices are heard (Roberts, 2002). But, increasingly, emphasis is being laid upon the importance of including a focus on the contextual parameters that shape teachers' lives rather than just focusing upon teacher practice alone (Goodson, 2003; Shrofel, 1991).

Shrofel (1991) strongly argues that analysing teaching practice within its political and economic context encourages teachers to theorise about their own position within the RPPN.

> Focus on the personal and on practice does not appear to lead practitioners or researchers/writers to analyse practice as theory, as social structure, or as manifestation of political and economic systems. This limitation of vision implicit in the narrative approach serves as a constraint on curriculum reform. (p. 64)

The study reported here therefore included a contextual focus and was designed to provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect upon their practice. Furthermore the study was developed in recognition of the need for research to impact upon a range of audiences in education from both the macro-level and the micro-level (Ozga & Moore, 1990).To further contextualise the reported study, a brief discussion about the impact of devolution and accountability processes upon teaching and the role of teachers is provided. This identifies the general operation of the RPPN in the current Western educational context as identified by research.

The Effects of Devolution and Accountability Processes upon Schools

It is argued that the accountability movement that has pervaded Western education systems has brought system and organisational changes that impact considerably upon the fundamental operation of government schools and even classroom teaching (Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2003). This movement brought with it its own distinctly business-like discourse and associated rhetoric, which have affected school culture, discourse and ideology and is often referred to as the marketization of education (Angus & Brown 1997). The implementation of accountability measures has resulted in schools developing a culture of performance and data (Earl 2004). Consequently, children's learning is discussed in terms of centrally prescribed outcomes and standards translated into statistics, the attainment of which is often linked to funding. Principals have become entrepreneurs of small businesses with education as their commodity and parents as their prime consumers. In this manner the devolution and accountability movements have manifested critical changes to school and teaching culture via shifts in discourse and ideology (Locke, 2001). They have resulted in changes to school and curricular management and also in stark changes to teaching and learning caused by altered expectations of teachers and the repositioning of the teacher (Goodson, 2003; Locke, 2001).This leads us to ask the following questions: How do teachers operate within this type of context? What role or roles do they play?

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The Problematic RPPN Conduit

Under the current infrastructure of the public education system in Australia, the state and federal education departments are commonly the instigators of major policy change and education reform within the system. Curriculum and pedagogical practices are guided by and are accountable to these government policy directions (Lankshear, Snyder & Green, 2000). Accompanying these logistical and bureaucratic demands is the growing expectation that teachers need to be held accountable for and to provide evidence of student learning (Angus & Brown, 1997; Stevens, 2003).

Teacher research and research on mandated policies have highlighted a number of important issues characteristic of this type of functioning of the RPPN. Reddy (1979) describes the relationship between theory and teaching practice in the area of linguistics as a 'conduit' and this metaphor has been further applied to teachers as they grapple with the implementation of policies and programs as a part of system- wide change (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 8).

The operation of the RPPN as a conduit is problematic for teachers, schools and students. Firstly, the expectation that teachers should deliver centrally developed policies or programs very often discounts the teacher's professional knowledge.Teachers are expected to implement these policies and practices regardless of whether they match the experiences of their students and the communities in which they work. In this way the operation of the RPPN as a conduit generates changed understandings about teachers' roles and practice by positioning teachers as deliverers of knowledge and curriculum developed elsewhere. As a result, there is a growing concern that increases in teacher accountability to schools and to authoritative education departments (Angus & Brown, 1997) have resulted in the technization of teaching and the de-professionalisation of the teacher (Goodson 2003).

In this manner the RPPN conduit is forging new concepts of teacher professionalism. There is increasing support for the argument that, although theteaching profession appears to be further professionalised by government policies and initiatives, it is in fact being de-professionalised by system reforms passed down to government schools (Goodson, 2003; Locke, 2001). This repositioning of teachers as agents enacting prescribed policies has resulted in some teachers feeling that their professional practice has been impinged upon and that their levels of professional autonomy are undermined (Locke, 2001; Stevens, 2003). There is a strong belief

that teaching is more than craft knowledge to be acquired as a set of usable techniques (Doecke & Gill, 2001; Perkins & Davidson, 2001). Policy-to-practice approaches provide an overly simplistic view of teachers as implementers and have been identified by Brooks & Grennon (1999) in the USA and Whitehead (1999) in the UK as resulting in detrimental changes to teaching such as the narrowing of the curriculum and the stifling of creativity.

The RPPN conduit appears to be in operation in Australia. In Victoria (where this study took place) all Victorian government primary schools have been implementing the Education Department's Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP) since 1999 (Auditor General, 2003). An important issue in this context is how teachers view these policies and programs and put them into practice.

Policy Analysis

For the purpose of this study, it is argued that the Victorian EYLP was much more than a recommended program. Although its implementation was never mandated, schools that implemented the EYLP were given extra funding to enhance their literacy program. It was therefore decided that this investigation warranted further attention and that the EYLP was worthy to be treated with the status of 'policy' and therefore would be subjected to policy analysis.

Literature on policy analysis reveals a tendency for teachers to assume that policies and programs passed along via the government *conduit* are evidence based on highly reputable, recent research (Becker, 1970; Shrofel, 1991). Taylor (2004) disregarded this assumption and critically analysed the literacy research upon which the US literacy policy guidelines were based. She identified its research base as narrow and selective, with research findings sometimes even being misinterpreted. Her verdict was that,'the US House and Senate have replaced good teaching with bad science'), resulting in teachers trying 'to teach in the cracks of the basal reading program' (Taylor, 2004, pp. 1, 45).

Taylor's work (2004) highlights the value in questioning and analysing government educational research. Similarly, this project is based upon the view that there is a valid argument for government literacy policies to be subject to independent review, for their selected research to be scrutinised and questioned, and for constructive criticism to be provided if appropriate.The

ultimate goal is to improve children's engagement in and with literacy, not just in theory but genuinely—in practice. In light of these understandings the current project included a review of the EYLP's research base.

A review of literacy policy research revealed a noticeable trend towards conducting what was called 'critical policy analysis','critical discourse analysis' and even combinations of the two,'discourse and policy analysis' (Stevens, 2003) by applying 'discourse analysis' as a method of analysis. The majority of education policy analyses using discourse theory have not used linguistic analysis but rather an ideological focus upon Gee's (1990) discourse (the types of language used in different social situations) and discourse (ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing and so on, accepted as instances of particular roles of groups of people). This mode of critical discourse analysis in education policy research is developing in Australia, the United States of America and England (Allard & Johnson, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Scott, 2000; Stevens, 2003;Taylor 2004). This study used critical discourse analysis as a tool by which to draw an ideological focus upon the discourse of the Victorian EYLP and also the teachers' interview responses.

Stevens (2003) engages in 'discourse and critical policy analysis' of a workshop on the US federal government's 'Reading First Initiative'. To her dismay, no definition of reading was provided and reading was characterised as 'an end-sum artifice, namely the ability to decode enough words per minute' (Stevens, 2003, p. 3). She also noted that the research rhetoric of meaning making clashed with the policy's emphasis upon phonics and the rhetoric of linguistic diversity conflicted with the policy's obvious favouring of Standard English. Stevens' critical analysis was upon the policy alone, whereas the current study also examines the constructions of reading held by the practising teachers who were implementing the policy, and compares and contrasts these to reading research and the policy as a basis for discussion of the existent RPPN.

Over the past few years, a certain construction of reading has been promoted in Victoria, involving a particular discourse about reading in the early years, resulting in all state primary schools in Victoria implementing the state government's EYLP. This literacy program specifies that certain structures be put in place (most notably a two-hour literacy block) and specific practices be employed. The EYLP has the potential to reshape the teaching of reading in primary schools and so it is valuable to critically examine the construction of reading that it

advocates and to understand if and how it relates to the professional knowledge and practice of primary school teachers who teach reading.

The study of Teachers' Roles in the RPPN in relation to Early Years Reading

This study was designed to tap into the professional voice of teachers and to identify their role in RPPN as described by them in relation to constructions of reading in the early years. Consequently, a qualitative research methodology was developed and implemented, incorporating the use of teacher interviews, policy analysis and critical discourse analysis (applied to the reading of the EYLP and the teacher interview data).

Examining the Victorian Early Years Literacy Program

The EYLP was critically examined in relation to research and theoretical literature in the field of early years reading. Only a small number of research articles had been produced about the EYLP at that time. This background knowledge of the EYLP confirmed the need to hear from teachers who implement the program as no prior research could be found that sought teachers' views on the EYLP.

The Teacher Interviews

Interviews are a powerful means of attempting to understand human beings (Yates, 2004). The teacher interviews were a means of listening to teachers and gaining their professional perspective on the EYLP, rather than depending only upon the official rhetoric of the department. The aim of the interviews was to elicit what these teachers believe and practise in their teaching of reading in students' early years and to understand how they interpret and engage with the EYLP, thereby constructing early years reading in their classroom.

A sample of 20 teacher participants who implemented the EYLP in years Preparatory to Year 2 were found for the study by random selection of eight schools from two Victorian government regions. This cohort of teachers comprised 18 female and 2 male teachers, all of who were classroom teachers, Early Years Literacy coordinators and Reading Recovery teachers.Their experience in teaching ranged from one to thirty-five years.

The individual teacher interviews were semi-structured, allowing for maximum flexibility during the interview process and exploration and clarification of the teachers' responses (Yates,

2004).Twelve main questions were designed to investigate views on what reading is, what it involves and how it develops. It was important to hear how teachers believed early years reading should be supported and how they implemented the EYLP in their classrooms. Each interview was audio-taped and anecdotal notes were written concurrently. The interviews were also transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The analytical framework developed for this study was informed by theories and research literature emanating from the domains of 'reading development','teaching' and 'policy analysis'. Research on 'early years reading development' was reviewed in order to identify, discuss and compare the constructions of early years reading found to be encapsulated within the EYLP and also those constructions of the practising teachers interviewed. This involved examining the EYLP research base and the explicit and implicit assumptions about reading that are reflected in the overall structure of the program, the nature of its repertoire of activities and the language that it uses. Similarly, the teacher interview data were examined in terms of the assumptions about reading that were implicit in the concepts and activities that teachers used to identify and teach reading and also the language that teachers used. In this manner, this body of research and theory became integrated into the analytical framework used to analyse the EYLP and teacher interview responses.

The review of these bodies of literature illuminated a range of complex issues, themes and trends pertinent to teaching in the RPPN, which in turn, informed the categories of analysis identified in this study. Additionally, themes emerged from close analysis of the teacher transcripts by use of Glaser & Strauss' (1965) grounded theory in which important themes and categories of analysis emerge from the data being studied.The analytical process for this study was congruent with Miles & Huberman's (1994) 'framework for qualitative data analysis',
which includes 'data reduction', 'data display' and 'the drawing and verifying of conclusions'. This method was extremely valuable in opening up seemingly tacit issues and bringing them to the foreground for professional discussion, debate and action.

The Analysis of the Victorian Early Years Literacy Program:
The Research–Policy Nexus

The study identified the EYLP as a highly organised early literacy policy. It cleverly incorporates a range of checks and balances into a tightly structured professional development plan and infrastructure, ensuring that teachers maintain its implementation in classrooms.The research base of the EYLP is considered to be somewhat limited in comparison to the range of literature and research available on reading and there is an obvious need for evaluative research on the implementation of the EYLP.

Critical discourse analysis of the EYLP 'reading' manuals identified the texts as problematic in terms of the way they deal with research. Firstly, only one of the four EYLP manuals, Teaching readers in the early years, contains a bibliography. Secondly, a number of references are listed in the bibliography with no identification within the EYLP texts as to their relevance. The EYLP texts rarely make direct connections to primary sources of research. Direct citations made to research are scarce and there is a tendency to invoke research without citing it. Furthermore the heavy reliance upon Slavin et al.'s (1996) Success for All program implicates the EYLP as failing to recognise the contextually specific nature of professional practice. Additionally, the assumption that the implementation of the EYLP should take precedence over teachers' prior literacy teaching practice assumes that teaching models are transferable and can be seen as devaluing the local knowledge and experience of practising teachers in Victoria. In this way it appears that knowledge and claims made about research in the policy are being transferred to teachers via the conduit without encouraging understanding or exploration of it.

The policy's strategy of establishing a 'whole school approach' to literacy had been successfully achieved by Slavin et al. (1996) in the Success for All program in the USA, and also by the EYLP's Early Literacy Research Project (ELRP) pilot project that preceded it. Unfortunately research articles directly about the EYLP were scarce and little evidence of further research on the success of the EYLP could be found. It is noted that, while the EYLP has been advocated as a comprehensive research-based program, it fails to describe its ELRP pilot project or cite the related published research conducted by Crevola and Hill (1997, 1998). Although the rhetoric is that the EYLP is 'best practice' and 'research based', it is surprising to consider that a program of this magnitude has a somewhat limited research base and that there is little tangible evidence of further research on the success of its implementation.

The Construction of Reading Advocated

The construction of early years reading encapsulated within the EYLP is somewhat narrow as a significant amount of other reading research is excluded. There is no mention of the importance of children gaining an understanding of multi-literacies and acquiring skills in critical literacy, neither is the home–school interface and its associated issues highlighted as significant issue for teachers to deal with. These areas of research are considered important by renowned literacy researchers (e.g.,Comber, 2001; Heath, 1983; Luke & Freebody, 1997). Furthermore, the EYLP is highly committed to assessing children's reading development in terms of levels of mastery in reading fluency, particularly for the purposes of benchmarking. This emphasis contradicts strongly with the policy's claim that the purpose of reading is to gain meaning. These findings indicate that while there is a clear link between research and policy in this context, there are weaknesses in this nexus.

The Policy–Praxis Nexus

All of the teachers interviewed defined reading as involving decoding or gaining meaning from print.These views align with the view of reading advocated by the EYLP. The following three themes that emerged from the data analysis of the research identified the teachers' roles in the RPPN: teachers as implementers, teachers as innovators and teachers as survivors.

Teachers as implementers

The data in this study indicate that the implementation of the EYLP impacted upon the participating teachers' roles by positioning them as 'implementers'.The EYLP prescribes to the teacher when and how to teach by the implementation of a set protocol for the reading hour, a small range of instructional methods and prescribed assessment tasks. As policy was transferred into practice, teachers' roles were modified. In implementing the policy, changes were made to staff hierarchy and also to teachers' classroom practice.

The Early Years Coordinator position that was initiated in schools as a part of the EYLP also positions teachers as 'implementers'. By use of a 'train the trainer' approach, these coordinators received professional development on the EYLP and in turn were commissioned to train the Early Years teachers at their school. The Professional Development manual explicitly prescribes how to conduct each training session, its duration and even in parts

dictates what the Coordinator is to say to the staff.

The rhetoric of the EYLP as an intervention program that develops a shared understanding of reading by working in partnership with teachers and parents is undermined by the fact that its discourse implicitly positions its own knowledge, principles and practices as expert. The discourse reveals a lack of recognition and respect for parent views and literacy experiences. Furthermore, the EYLP effectively locates knowledge about the teaching of reading as being contained by it, and being outside the context of knowledge and experience of the teachers' professional practice.

Discourse analysis of the teacher interviews highlighted a commonly held view that literacy pedagogies are cyclical phases dependent upon the policy of particular eras:

> 'Flashcards . . .Yes, that was the thinking at the time' (Kathy, 15 years teaching);

> 'We used to do phonics, then it went really out of fashion. Now it's back in again' (Karen, 29 years teaching).

This prevailing notion of teaching practice as being prescribed by policy also positions teachers as 'implementers' who are subject to waves of reform and knowledge passed to them via the conduit.

A number of teachers were concerned about the highly structured nature of the literacy block, its associated assessment schedule and the expectation for young children to engage in independent group work.This concern reiterates the notion that the teachers' own professional knowledge was being discounted with preference for knowledge that arrives through the conduit.

Teachers as Innovators

Although all of the participating teachers were categorised as 'implementers', one school reported implementing an innovative change. The teachers at this school assumed the role of 'innovator' by creatively modifying the literacy block to meet the needs of their students' learning.There was a two-week period in which they conducted a thematic unit on the Zoo. Each day the children worked in likeability groupings and were assigned to different teachers who facilitated their learning about a particular animal through a range of reading and writing tasks.

> We don't let the fact that we have to have a 2 hour block stop us from doing
> something that we feel we want to branch out upon . . . The content is Studies
> of Society and Environment but the actual skills and processes that we use are
> the basis of reading. So you won't see a whole lot of guided reading happening
> but you'll see a whole lot of talking and reading big books and children writing
> what they feel and having a go. (Julie, 22 years teaching)

This innovation was reportedly successful in highly motivating the children to engage in literacy activities with interest and enjoyment.

Teachers as Survivors

Most of the teachers interviewed reported developing a number of coping strategies in order to be able to implement the EYLP while dealing with time and resource limitations. The most common strategy was to modify when and how the literacy block was conducted. In this way teachers repositioned themselves as 'survivors'.

The EYLP requires daily implementation of the literacy block between 9 and 11 a.m. but most of the schools reportedly conducted it four days a week, sometimes in segments, due to issues associated with timetabling, overcrowding of the curriculum, the late arrival of students and the availability of teacher aides, who were essential in assisting some children to work in small independent groups. The EYLP's requirement to conduct an uninterrupted literacy block was also modified by some teachers:

> Some schools have doors closed and that's it. That's false. I think life happens
> with interruptions . . . As much as possible it's uninterrupted but I think it's
> unrealistic to have sort of closed doors. (Julie, 22 years teaching)

In this manner some teachers found it necessary to modify their implementation of the EYLP as a means of survival: to minimise impracticalities in order to better meet the learning needs of their students. In this light tweaking the policy may be viewed positively as a means by which teachers are combining the structure and knowledge of the policy with their existing professional knowledge.

The Nexus between Research and Praxis

Most of the teachers in this study believed that they were up to date with the latest research on early years reading. Interestingly, very few of the teachers directly accessed research themselves; they used other sources to gain this information. Only two teachers in the cohort

spoke of attending professional conferences and having previous membership with professional associations. Most teachers relied upon professional development (PD) courses as a primary means of accessing research and furthering their professional knowledge and they recognized these courses as heavily influencing their views on early years reading and reading pedagogies.

A significant problem identified by this study is the current tendency for research to be mediated to teachers by education departments and those in leadership positions within schools. This research knowledge is imparted to teachers through a variety of means including policies, publications, internet sites, presentations and by word of mouth. The data provided evidence that these early years teachers were content to be reliant upon this mediation as they perceived it to be an effective avenue by which to access the latest research. Were these sources of knowledge well informed and did they interpret research correctly?

The data revealed two teachers that relied solely upon their early years coordinator and vice principal to keep them informed of the latest research. Unbeknown to them, the coordinator did not read any professional literature and the vice principal only accessed a selective collection of research that was sent to her by the Department of Education and Training, the principals' organisation and the union.

Most teachers assumed that the EYLP had a sound research-base and so did not critique it or seek other literacy research. As evidenced by the interview data, teachers in this study valued research but did not access it themselves due to time constraints, preoccupation with the demands of the school, curriculum and policies.They believed they were informed about recent research through professional development programs and the EYLP. This reliance of teachers upon 'experts' and policy to channel research to them revealed that the nexus between research and practice in this context is dependent upon the notion of a 'conduit' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Reddy, 1979) transferring research in a one-way direction from policy to practice.

Another significant finding was that the teachers interviewed did not engage critically with research literature or policies given to them. Neither did they express interest in conducting valuable research themselves and thereby becoming a knowledge producer for others. In this manner it appears that the current operation of the research–praxis nexus is strikingly similar to

the 'hierarchy of credibility' that Becker (1970) described 38 years ago,where teachers readily accepted the actions and decisions of those in responsibility above them as credible and became resigned to them.

The Functioning of the RPPN in this Context

This research project found that there is a nexus between research, policy and practice in the context of early years reading in Victoria. This nexus, however, is functioning as a 'conduit' that noticeably has a one-way flow. The conduit is largely channelling information from research to policy and from policy to practice. There was little evidence in this study of any flow occurring in alternate directions between research, policy and practice (see Figure 2).

It is arguable as to how effective the current operation of the RPPN is. as it is recognised that judgements about its efficiency may be dependent upon whether one's perspective is that of a researcher, policy maker or teacher. As discussed earlier, the use of this conduit effectively positions teachers as 'implementers', thereby affecting their role in the RPPN.

As described earlier, a research–policy nexus was found to exist in the study's context. Weaknesses were identified in terms of the policy's limited literature base, the need for evaluative research on its implementation and the inadequate presentation of research within the text of the policy manuals.

The nexus between policy and praxis is viewed as very strong in this context. The EYLP was identified as contributing to the de-professionalisation of teachers through its discourse and prescribed structures. The construction of literacy advocated by the policy was more highly valued than teachers' professional knowledge and the policy impinged upon the teachers' practices, repositioning them as 'implementers' of policy.
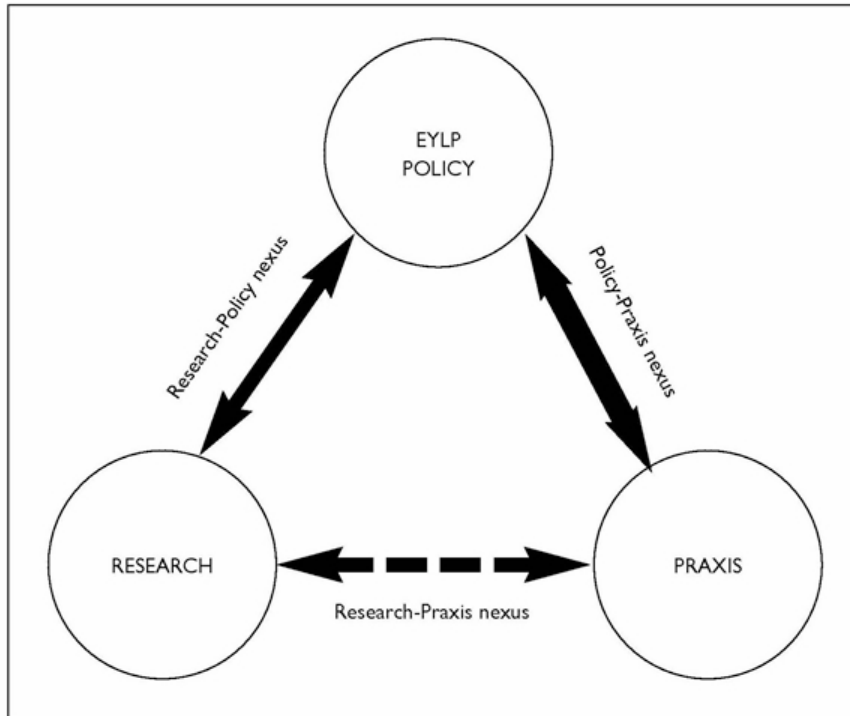
Figure 2 The current functioning of the RPPN

The nexus between research and praxis is viewed as weak, as teachers in the study
rarely accessed primary sources of research and none of them spoke of engaging with, or
conducting, teacher research. Rather, most of the participating teachers assumed there was a
tight nexus between research and policy upon which they could rely. They were reliant upon
secondary sources of research such as the Department of Education (through policies,
guidelines, newspapers) or those in authority over them such as an early years coordinator,
vice principal or principal.

Suggestions for Improving the Functioning of the RPPN

The findings from this study have direct implications for those working in the areas of research,
policy and practice. Underpinning this research is the view that tight links in the RPPN are
desirable for establishing synergy that is likely to equate with positive educational benefits for
all parties involved. This assumption is based upon the premise that if educational researchers,
policy makers and teacher practitioners are better informed about one another's work, then the
synergy created by this alliance will assist in working towards improving education. Such
improvement is important in further minimising negative effects such as the de-
professionalisation of teachers that was found in this study. While establishing a sense of
shared purpose and unity is viewed as important to establishing and maintaining tight links in

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the RPPN, this study also recognises that total complaisance towards each sector could also have negative ramifications and yield problems that arise from uncritical conformity and 'group think'. In order to work towards strengthening the RPPN, this study provides the following suggestions.

To further strengthen the nexus between research and policy, it is recommended that policy makers ensure that policies and programs are founded upon a well-informed understanding of sound research. This is important as teachers in the study relied almost exclusively upon policy to serve as a bridge between research and practice. Furthermore, including citations to research within the policy will better demonstrate to others how these understandings and ideas reflect current research and would be valuable in arguing the validity of the policy. In this manner, those who want to further investigate the policy's research base will have access to references of primary sources of research. It is also important that policies be evaluated and researched for their efficiency and their effectiveness in practice in schools.

In order to further strengthen the nexus between research and practice it is important to establish effective avenues of communication between them. It is recommended that teachers be provided with opportunities to better access current research. This could be achieved in a number of ways and should involve action at the university level for the pre-service teacher, the school level for the professional practitioner and the departmental level.

Teachers reported a loss of professional autonomy when positioned as 'implementers' of the EYLP. Policy makers therefore need to be aware that policy can greatly affect teachers' roles with negative consequences. It is therefore recommended that future policies allow teachers room to be innovative and to apply their own professional knowledge to the implementation of the policy to adapt it to suit the needs of their students. Policy makers should ensure that all parties involved in implementing the policy have opportunities to participate in its development. It is also vital that the discourse used reflects the recognition of the importance of these groups.

The current study demonstrated that the RPPN is operating more like a conduit with information flowing in one direction only. It is suggested that educational benefits may be gained if the RPPN allowed information to circulate throughout the nexus in a multidimensional way. This would ensure that policies would be continually updated with the latest research, that policies would be implemented with optimum effect and that teaching practice would inform

research and vice versa. This would be a continuous process resulting in high quality

teaching, learning and education. In a multidimensional RPPN, teachers would implement research-based policy and still retain some professional autonomy in their practice. By strengthening the link between practice and research (i.e., by ensuring teachers have access to recent research, by listening to teachers and encouraging them to conduct research as knowledge producers) research would be more relevant to practice.

Rather than a one-way flow of information down a conduit, the nexus between research, policy and praxis needs to be communicative and ever evolving, allowing for change and innovation in order to improve the quality of learning and teaching. It is recognised that many of the implications of this study involve funding and so it is important that governing bodies recognise the benefits of strengthening the RPPN and prioritise this area for research and funding. Clearly the effective functioning of the RPPN has many benefits, not only for those working

in the areas of research, policy and teaching practice but more importantly, for the learners, for whom the nexus is formed.

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Keywords

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