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Setting an agenda for English education research

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ABSTRACT

This note reports the results of a Delphi panel priority setting exercise for English education research. An initial item-generating survey of 75 English education academics and teachers worldwide was conducted; a thematic analysis of responses generated 31 potential priorities for future research. An adapted Delphi panel consisting of 44 English education experts was invited to take part in two rounds of ranking; four major priorities were identified at the end of the second round. These were as follows: social justice in English education; race in English education; translating research into and out of the classroom; and the nature of the subject of English.

KEYWORDS

English education; social justice; education research

Introduction

This paper reports an exercise in agenda setting for the next 10 years of research in English education. We defined English education as education in literature or language in a first language context, that is, in countries where English is the main language. It therefore included the teaching of students who have English as an Additional Language or who are bilingual (such as Welsh-English speakers) educated in an English-speaking context, but it did not include the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language. This reflects the concerns of *English in Education* but also the worldwide dominance of applied linguistics research when a search is conducted for “English education research”.

Much research in education is directed by the priorities of funders and governments; there is a focus on “what works” and the so-called gold standard of the Randomised Controlled Trial, which presents difficulties for the extremely contextualised nature of education (see, for example, Koutsouris and Norwich 2018). The exercise described here sought to draw on the collective wisdom of the English education community to establish if there were areas where we might see some agreement on what priorities would look like if they came from the grassroots of the field.

The field of English education research

In the US, the origin of educational research is often traced to Joseph Mayer Rice, who conducted one of the earliest large-scale educational studies. A 16-month survey of over 30,000 children produced what might be the earliest outcome for English education

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research: Rice rejected spelling drills as being unrelated to test scores, which led to his writing *The Rational Spelling Book* (1898) as a guide to the teaching of spelling. The field has somewhat deepened and widened since then. Sperling and DiPardo (2008) provided a US-based overview of the field of English education research, noting the early alignment between English education and nation building in the USA. This alignment has been noted the world over, by Green and Cormack (2008) in Australia and by Kenway et al. (2017) in relation to the British Empire. The use of the English curriculum to attempt nationalistic ends by politicians is not only historical, but it resonates with curriculum reform in England in the recent past (Elliott 2014). Sperling and DiPardo also identified literacy (including multiple literacies) and the research–practice relationship as key concerns of the contemporary field of English education. They concluded:

The questions driving the challenges before English education research and researchers are still those that scholars have asked for generations: “What is the scope of English education and what is the role of research in shaping English education practice?” Yet the social, cultural, and political conditions that give these questions meaning have changed dramatically across the generations, and the challenges ahead that revolve around these questions are conceptually, empirically, and politically intertwined in new ways. (2008, 96–97)

As they argue, the questions that drive English education research cannot be settled once for all time. However, now and again we may reflect on the social, cultural, and political conditions, and how those may alter our priorities as English teachers and researchers.

Method

The research took place over three rounds. An initial open questionnaire addressed to teachers, academics and interested parties in English education received responses from the UK, Australia, Ireland, Canada, the USA and English-speaking international schools globally. A first round adapted Delphi panel ranked items generated from an analysis of the open items; a second, final round ranked the top 15 items from the first round. In the first Delphi round, the panel were asked to select the 10 items they thought were the most important priorities for English education research and in the second round the five most important items.

Delphi panel methodology uses structured anonymous rounds of decisions to create an overall decision to enable influence by other judges on the panel without the risks of a group decision-making process which have been described as “groupthink”. It is also a method which enables asynchronous consultation of a range of experts (e.g. Okoli and Pawlowski 2004; Hsu and Sandford 2007).

Recruitment of participants to the initial survey was via open invitation on Twitter via NATE and individual accounts and by direct email to researchers in the field. Participants in the Delphi panel were those who indicated that they would be interested in taking part in the process via the initial questionnaire. In this, we diverted from traditional Delphi panel methodology; we considered that any teacher or researcher working in the field of English education constituted an expert and would have a valuable point of view. The initial survey was completed by 75 participants, of whom 40 were secondary school teachers and 25 were teacher educators; these categories were not mutually exclusive,

and participants reported multiple roles of teacher, researcher, consultant and writer. Of these participants, 44 who had indicated interest were invited to participate in the Delphi rounds; the first round had 31 responses and the second 29.

After the initial survey, a thematic analysis of the responses to the question “What, in your view, are the most vital areas for English Education researchers to pursue during the coming decade?” was conducted. Via rounds of grouping and discussion, we agreed on 38 items to put into the first round of Delphi panel. The items to progress to the second round were chosen first by eliminating the one item which had not been ranked as among the 10 most important by any participant. The range was 0–23 panel members choosing any given item, and there was no obvious cut-off point. Therefore, we took the 50% of items above the median (which meant that at least 29% of respondents chose an item). All 15 items as ranked in the second round are presented below.

Findings and discussion

The final ranking of the items taken into the second Delphi round can be found in [Table 1](#); the second column represents the number of raters who considered that item to be among their top five priorities. The top four priorities were chosen by at least 40% of the expert panel participants in the second round of voting.

During the first Delphi round, panel members were also asked not only to indicate their top 10 items but also to choose the most important of these. Only four were chosen by more than one as *the most important*. These included three of the final top four items (A, C & D). The additional item, which appeared below the median in the final round, was item I – the philosophy of English. Items A (Social Justice), C (Race in English education), and D (the nature of the subject) were the top three in the initial ranking; item B – the translation of research into and out of classrooms – gained its place during the final exercise. In doing so, it resonates with Sperling and DiPardo’s argument that English education research

is well positioned to explore the understandings teachers are constructing in light of the myriad influences that inform their long-term planning and moment-by-moment practices. Too often, policymakers have clung to the naïve belief that a given study can provide transportable “how-tos”—as if knowledge were stable and transmittable through prescriptive training. In the case of English education, the uncertainty concerning what research has to offer is multiplied exponentially—not only because of historic debate concerning what the field is or should be and attendant notions concerning the role of research and researchers ... (2008, 90)

It is notable that neither race nor social justice appears as a major concern in Sperling and DiPardo’s overview of English education research up to the early part of the twenty-first century. While the initial survey occurred before the reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter protests in the US and the UK in early 2020, the later panels could well have been influenced by an awareness of the importance of these matters in the contemporary political and social climate.

Areas of interest for research which were identified through the survey but were not ranked highly enough in the first Delphi round to be taken through to the second Delphi round can be found in [Table 2](#). While they may not have gained convergence of opinion as being the most important, they do represent desirable areas for future

Table 1. Results of second Delphi round in descending order of importance.

Item	Priority for research	Number of choices
A	Social justice (English and different social groups (race, class, migrants, linguistic minorities, intersections; closing the attainment gap; citizenship through literature)	14
B	Translating research into (and out of) the classroom; collaboration between academia and teachers for research; more exemplar case studies; dissemination of teacher voice; researching sustained impacts of intervention	13
C	Race in English education (Whiteness; anti-racist pedagogy; politics and persistence of Western canon); diversifying/ decolonising the curriculum; the use of literature in translation or of other Anglophone countries	13
D	The nature of the subject: Literature in English as a whole; integrity of the subject in face of literacy; what is knowledge in English; relationships between secondary subject and tertiary discipline	12
E	Teacher professionalism and agency: external pressures; risk management; Identity and professional development in the context of increasing regulatory definitions of teacher effectiveness and expertise; teacher values, autonomy, creativity, risk taking in curriculum and pedagogy	11
F	English and language; oracy; speaking and listening; EAL; teaching English in other language medium environments; translanguaging; bringing ethnic and linguistic minority scholars into the field (reconsider English? Education); questioning	11
G	Curriculum development in English/ engagement with curriculum policy/Policy discourse links to classroom practice	10
H	Student perspectives; student enjoyment in context of constraints, e.g. functional English alternatives that inspire; delivery of large amounts of content while maintaining a love of the subject	10
I	Philosophy of English; what do we mean by “knowledge” in English?; “authenticity” in reading and writing; reading as a way of knowing; status of subject and discipline of English; “real world” English and its relationship to school English; genre	9
J	Assessment (Impact of high stakes testing; epistemic responsibility in assessment)	8
K	Cultural capital, e.g. effect of reading on cultural capital, influence of BAME/ women/ LGBTQ+ writers on cultural capital	8
L	How to encourage critical literacy/ critical reasoning	8
M	Creative writing: teachers as writers, confidence and competence; creative writing pedagogy; how and when students “learn to write”	6
N	Longitudinal studies of teachers’ careers and teaching practice; life cycle of English teacher – from secondary to degree to teaching; impact of school-based routes into English teaching; how teachers’ own reading and interests impact their teaching; early career English teacher workforce; English teacher education and retention	5
O	Pedagogies for EAL and migrant children; integration into practice of theory and research on how ethnic and linguistic minorities are taught and how they learn; engaging with families of migrant and immigrant children	2

research and may be of use to those considering where to direct their future explorations. There are very few areas of English education which are not important to someone, somewhere. Equally, there are some very significant parts of the English education process (reading, both as literacy and in more advanced form, and Shakespeare, to name but two) which are not regarded as research priorities, which may reflect the strength of the existing field in those areas. Taken together with the items in [Table 1](#), they represent the range of inter-related interests that form the field of English education.

It is noticeable that single clause items were not rated as highly; this may represent a limitation in the way that we framed the Delphi ranking exercise, but it also reflects the places where individual research ideas are not part of a larger overall agenda. Respondents to the initial survey, whatever their views on what the research priorities should be, when asked “why”, demonstrated concern about the way English education interacts with and

Table 2. Other suggested areas for research priorities in English education.

English and climate change
Workload for English teachers (e.g. essay-based subjects and teachers' mental health)
Vocabulary (e.g. quantitative data on vocab and development of reading skills)
Technology and/or AI in English (e.g. smartphones and their impact on English; impact on student disposition and skills or needs; digital and multimodal literacies)
Marking and feedback (methods, workload, time)
Teaching of Shakespeare
Social media, teachmeets, grassroots movements: pros and cons in terms of English development, e.g. information and misinformation
Analysis of classroom transcripts re classroom talk
Academic writing (pedagogies; what factors correlate with better essay writing; writing frames for response to text; cognitive and metacognitive processing)
Post-16 English: pedagogies; decline of take up; post 16 transition
Social and Emotional Learning in English/English Education and ethical dilemmas; emotional capacity to understand "effect on reader"
English and mental health (of students); anxiety; creativity; wellbeing; student agency; student enjoyment
English as a subject for the future/ preparing students for their futures; what do we need to function as literate today?
Multimodality: Develop an adequate theory of multimodality in communication (e.g. voice to text in composition, automatic editing, etc.); multimodal composition in the classroom; leveraging multimodalities in building overall literacy competence; integration of digital and print-based literacies)
Reading (as literacy): strategies for strugglers at 14+; most effective ways to encourage reading outside the classroom, including for disengaged; connections between reading and writing; pursuit of reading and writing genres outside of the "genres of power"
Reading (as an advanced skill): responding to non-fiction; pedagogies for comparison and summary; inference skills; connection between linguistic knowledge and literature/creative texts; literature pedagogies
Relationship of English and STEM; effect of focus on STEM on English (e.g. gender; tertiary takeup)
International comparative studies of policy, curriculum, pedagogy and professional development
Transitions at different age points
Collaboration in English teaching
Deep learning in English
Cultural competence
Use of creative research methods

prepares students for the modern world. English as a subject is intimately bound up with life chances and with the ways in which students learn to engage with the world around them and the information – or misinformation – directed their way.

Conclusion

This exercise suggests a clear path forward for English education research: the need for social justice and racial equity is a major driver, as is strengthening the reciprocal relationship between academic research and classroom practice. To make a start on this process, *English in Education* will invite contributions for a special issue on Social Justice to be published in 2023.

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