Researching Literacy: A Methodological Map

Literacy has been researched using many research methodologies and from within many disciplines including history, linguistics, education, philosophy, semiotics, sociology and anthropology. This chapter presents a map of applied research methodologies that have been used to explore the field of literacy, primarily from social perspectives. It does not claim to be a comprehensive map covering all the forms of socially oriented research that can be applied to literacy, but throughout the chapter references are listed to extend the map in various ways. We have chosen to focus on those approaches which practitioner-researchers would find easier to work with in their local contexts. These approaches include action research, case study research, design-based research, discourse analysis, multimodal research, ethnographic research and verbal protocols. In addition, as shown in Chapter 2, historical research into literacy reveals how measures of what it means to be literate have changed over time. We finish this chapter with a brief explanation of meta-analysis because this statistical approach is now being used in educational fields to summarise findings from past studies in order to generalise about the size and nature of positive or negative effects of particular interventions on student achievement (for example, Hattie 2009). The final section of this chapter looks at what might constitute a continuing broad literacy research project into the 21st century, in which we hope our readers will participate.

In this book we have argued that researching the ways reading and writing have been taught in the past provides literacy researchers and educators with insights into the origin of the perspectives, debates and issues which shape the ways we view literacy and practise literacy education in our own time. An historical perspective also helps researchers and educators evaluate their own contribution in terms of the
way it responds to changing demands and contexts. Historical research, like literacy research, can be undertaken on the basis of different theories, models and conceptual frameworks but it can only ever reconstruct and interpret the past on the basis of incomplete evidence obtained through both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are documents, artefacts or eyewitness accounts of the era under investigation, while secondary sources are descriptions or interpretations of events composed at a later time by those who were not present. Both types of sources need to be evaluated, analysed and interpreted. The techniques of historical research enable literacy researchers to identify constants, changes and trends in literate practices and literacy education, to record the contribution of individuals and institutions, and to evaluate these against the historical record as well as claims made by those defending traditional practices and those proposing new approaches or directions.

**Historical research references**


**Types of research**

A first general question to ask is ‘What is research?’; a straightforward answer is that it ‘simply means trying to find answers to questions’ (Dornyei 2007: 15). Finding answers to questions can be done in two ways. The first is to look at what other people have said through secondary research, for example, in a literature review (Brown 1988). This is an important step in any research project because it can provide a