

## **THE EFFECTIVE TEACHERS OF LITERACY PROJECT**

**This study was commissioned to help the Teacher Training Agency and teachers in England to understand more clearly how effective teachers help children to become literate. The findings are based on close examination of the work of a sample of teachers whose pupils make effective learning gains in literacy and of a sample of teachers who were less effective in literacy teaching.**

**The aims of this research were to:**

- 1. identify the key factors of what effective teachers know, understand and do which enables them to put effective teaching of literacy into practice in the primary phase;**
- 2. identify the strategies which would enable those factors to be more widely applied;**
- 3. examine aspects of continuing professional development which contribute to the development of effective teachers of literacy;**
- 4. examine what aspects of their initial teacher training and induction contribute to developing expertise in novice teachers of literacy.**

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**The research** found that the effective teachers of literacy in this study tended to:

- make it explicit that the purpose of teaching literacy is to enable pupils to create meaning using text. They were very specific about how literacy activities at the whole text, word and sentence levels contributed to creating meaning.
- centre much of their teaching of literacy around ‘shared’ texts, that is, texts which the teacher and children either read or wrote together. Shared texts were used as a means of making the connections between text, sentence and word level knowledge explicit to children.
- teach aspects of reading and writing such as decoding and spelling in a systematic and highly structured way and also in a way that made clear to pupils why these aspects were necessary and useful.
- have developed strong and coherent personal philosophies about the teaching of literacy which guided their selection of teaching materials and approaches.
- have well developed systems for monitoring children’s progress and needs in literacy and use this information to plan future teaching.
- have extensive knowledge about literacy although not necessarily in a form which could be abstracted from the context of teaching it.
- have had considerable experience of in-service activities in literacy, both as learners and, often, having themselves planned and led such activities for their colleagues.

## Further details about the findings

### Teachers' subject knowledge in literacy

- All the teachers knew the requirements of the National Curriculum well and could describe what they were doing in terms of these.
- They all also recognised the different literacy teaching needs of KS1 and KS2 children.
- The effective teachers placed a great emphasis on children's knowledge of the purposes and functions of reading and writing and of the structures used to enable these processes. They taught language structures but were concerned to contextualise this teaching and to present such structures functionally and meaningfully to children.
- Even the effective teachers had limited success at recognising some types of words in a sentence and some sub-word units out of context. Units such as phonemes, onsets and rimes and morphemes were problematic for them and even using more everyday terminology for these units still did not guarantee success for the teachers in recognising them. This casts doubt on the effective teachers' abstract knowledge of such linguistic concepts.
- Despite this apparent lack of explicit, abstract knowledge of linguistic concepts, the effective teachers used such knowledge implicitly in their teaching, particularly that connected with phonics. It seems that the teachers knew the material they were teaching in a particular way. They appeared to know and understand it in the form in which they taught it to the children, rather than abstracted from the teaching context.
- When examining and judging samples of children's reading and writing, all the teachers were able to analyse mistakes. But the way the two groups approached the task was different:
  1. the effective teachers were more diagnostic in the ways they approached the task and were more able to generate explanations as to why children read or wrote as they did.
  2. in examining pieces of writing, the two groups eventually mentioned similar features, but the effective teachers were quicker to focus on possible underlying causes of a child's writing behaviour.
- Although both groups reached broadly similar conclusions about children's reading and writing, the effective teachers were able to offer many more reasons for their conclusions and to make these detailed judgements more quickly.

### Teachers' beliefs about literacy

- The effective teachers of literacy tended to place a high value upon communication and composition in their views about the teaching of reading and writing. They were more coherent in their belief systems about the teaching of literacy and tended to favour teaching activities which explicitly emphasised the deriving and creating meaning.
- Although they emphasised purpose and meaning in their belief statements, this did not mean that the more technical aspects of reading and writing processes were

neglected. There was plenty of evidence that such aspects as phonic knowledge, spelling, grammatical knowledge and punctuation were prominent in the teaching of effective teachers of literacy. Technical aspects of literacy tended, however, to be approached in distinctive ways by the effective teachers.

- The effective teachers embedded attention to word and sentence level aspects of reading and writing within whole text activities which were both meaningful and explained clearly to pupils. Teachers in the validation sample were more likely to teach technical features as discrete skills for their own sakes, and did not necessarily ensure that pupils understood the wider purpose of such skills in reading and writing.

### **Teaching practices**

- The effective teachers made heavy use of big books in their teaching; they were also more likely to use other adults to assist their classroom work. All the teachers taught letter sounds but the effective teachers tended to teach within the context of using a text and to use short, regular teaching sessions, often involving them modelling to the children how sounds worked. They placed less emphasis on paper exercises.
- The effective teachers were generally much more likely to embed their teaching of reading into a wider context and to show how specific aspects of reading and writing contribute to communication. They tended to use whole texts as the basis from which to teach skills such as vocabulary, word attack and recognition and use of text features. They were also very clear about their purposes for using such texts.
- The effective teachers of literacy, because of their concern to contextualise their teaching of language features within shared text experiences, made explicit connections for their pupils between the text, sentence and word levels of language study.
- The lessons of the effective teachers were all conducted at a brisk pace. They regularly refocused children's attention on the task at hand and used clear time frames to keep children on task. They also tended to conclude their lessons by reviewing, with the whole class, what the children had done during the lesson.
- The effective teachers used modelling extensively. They regularly demonstrated reading and writing to their classes in a variety of ways, often accompanying these demonstrations by verbal explanations of what they were doing.
- Some effective teachers differentiated the work they asked pupils to do by allotting different tasks on the basis of ability. These teachers also used another approach by varying the support given to particular groups of children when they were engaged on tasks the whole class would do at some point. By this means they were able to keep their classes working more closely together through a programme of work.
- The classrooms of the effective teachers were distinguished by the heavy emphasis on literacy in the environments which had been created. There were many examples of literacy displayed in these classrooms, these examples were regularly brought to the children's attentions and the children were encouraged to use them to support their own literacy.
- The effective teachers had very clear assessment procedures, usually involving a great deal of focused observation and systematic record-keeping. This contributed

markedly to their abilities to select appropriate literacy content for their children's needs.

### **Professional development**

- The effective teachers of literacy were more likely to have a subject background in English language and related subjects.
- Experiences during initial teacher training had been largely forgotten by the experienced teachers but the more recently qualified effective teachers did value the training they had received in teaching literacy. Initial training seemed to have had an important impact upon teachers' approaches to and success at teaching literacy, but this was inevitably short term.
- Experience of longer in-service courses and participation in long term literacy projects had significantly affected teachers' views about literacy teaching. The most significant feature of these longer term experiences appeared to be that they had provided the opportunity and impetus for the teachers to develop and clarify their own personal philosophies about literacy teaching.
- Shorter courses were also seen as useful in professional development, but largely in terms of meeting a personal need or keeping in touch with recent developments.
- Effective teachers were more likely, and possibly more able, to discuss their views about literacy teaching as a philosophy and to make explicit links between their beliefs and their teaching practices.
- The role of English co-ordinator was very significant to the effective teachers. It was a focus for in-service provision of a certain type and had also generated substantial commitment to the area of teaching. Simply being the English co-ordinator had significantly helped many of these teachers to improve their teaching of literacy
- Teachers not in the fortunate position of being the English co-ordinator in their school were more likely to be relatively deprived in terms of in-service opportunities in literacy.

### **Recent developments in literacy teaching**

Although this research started before the development of the National Literacy Project, there are important connections between the two which will be of particular interest to teachers and trainers who may wish to make use of the findings of this study. The following points are central to this:

- The effective teachers of literacy had an extensive knowledge of the content of literacy, even though this was not generally a knowledge which could be abstracted from the context of their teaching action.
- Because of this knowledge they were able to see, and help their pupils see, connections between the text, sentence and word levels of language.
- The effective teachers had coherent belief systems about literacy and its teaching and these were generally consistent with the ways they chose to teach.

- These belief systems, and hence their teaching practices, tended to emphasise the importance of children being clear about the purposes of reading and writing and of using this clarity of purpose as a means of embedding the teaching of grammar, phonics etc. into contexts which made sense to the children.
- These teachers were teaching literacy in lessons which were clearly focused on this area (literacy hours). Within these lessons they used a mixture of whole class interactive teaching and small group guided work, with occasional individual teaching usually undertaken by a classroom assistant or volunteer helper.
- A good deal of their teaching involved the use of shared texts such as big books, duplicated passages and multiple copies of books, through which the attention of a whole class or group was drawn to text, sentence and word level features.

### **Implications for further development**

There are several implications emerging from the research in terms of future policy and practice in continuing professional development.

#### *Access to in-service courses*

There has been a tendency for literacy curriculum specialists (school English co-ordinators) to be targeted for in-service opportunities in literacy. There is evidence that this policy has had a positive effect on these teachers but that teachers who had not been designated as school English co-ordinators were somewhat restricted in the in-service opportunities available to them. From our findings we would argue that *all* teachers need professional development in this crucial area.

#### *The nature of professional development experience*

Our findings suggest that a particularly valuable form of professional development is teachers' involvement in longer term projects where they have to work out philosophies and policies regarding literacy and its teaching. It would be useful, therefore, for teachers to be encouraged to involve themselves more fully in educational research. Such a move towards teaching as an inquiry-based profession is plainly justified by the findings of our research.

#### *The content of in-service courses*

The most effective in-service content seems not to be that which focuses on knowledge at the teachers' own level, but rather that which deals with subject knowledge in terms of how this is taught to children. This implies a more practical approach and the teachers in this study confirmed that one of the most successful forms of in-service was that which gave them guided opportunities to try out new ideas in the classroom.

While we found little evidence that the effective teachers of literacy had an extensive command of a range of linguistic terminology, it does seem at least possible that having a

greater command might help them further improve their teaching of literacy. We strongly recommend that such terminology be introduced (or reintroduced) to teachers not as a set of definitions for them to learn but as the embodiments of linguistic functions with a strong emphasis upon the ways these functions might be taught.

### ***The nature and content of initial training***

A priority for this must be equipping novice teachers with an range of pedagogic strategies to enable them to operate successfully in developing children's literacy. But, as with experienced teachers, developing such strategies involves more than simple practical experience. Novice teachers also need to develop an awareness of why and in what circumstances they might employ particular teaching approaches. They need not only procedural knowledge about literacy teaching (knowing how), but also conditional knowledge (knowing when and in what way). The development of this knowledge seems to demand experience in a range of contrasting contexts, together with the opportunity to compare and contrast their experiences with those of others. It would also be useful for them to be taught specific strategies and then given the opportunity to try these out under guidance in classrooms.

### ***The role of the subject co-ordinator in the school***

The evidence from this project suggests that, in order to become an effective teacher of literacy, one of the most beneficial steps a teacher could take would be to become the English co-ordinator in his/her school. Such a position strongly encourages the development of specialist expertise. Schools should consider broadening the possession of this expertise by rotating the role of English co-ordinator every few years.