

This article was downloaded by: [University of Warwick]

On: 23 September 2011, At: 01:57

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number:

1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street,
London W1T 3JH, UK



Educational Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cedr20>

Secondary Teachers' Views and Actions Concerning Literacy and Literacy Teaching

Maureen Lewis & David Wray

Available online: 02 Jul 2010

To cite this article: Maureen Lewis & David Wray (1999): Secondary Teachers' Views and Actions Concerning Literacy and Literacy Teaching, Educational Review, 51:3, 273-281

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131919997515>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.



Secondary Teachers' Views and Actions Concerning Literacy and Literacy Teaching

MAUREEN LEWIS, *EXEL, University of Plymouth, UK*

DAVID WRAY, *University of Warwick*

ABSTRACT *Within the context of the current government's concerns to raise literacy standards and its stated intention to examine literacy practices in the secondary school, this report details a survey concerning secondary teachers' views of and knowledge about literacy and literacy teaching. It argues that whilst the majority of secondary teachers acknowledge their role in supporting pupils' literacy, they are often uncertain of how to proceed; they make limited use of many literacy teaching strategies and may even assist their pupils in 'retreating from print'. The survey reveals that few secondary teachers have had any training in literacy development although teachers from all curriculum specialist areas indicate their willingness to engage with literacy training and INSET. It is argued that secondary schools will need such support and the sharing of good practice within and across schools if they are to be successful in supporting literacy development across the curriculum.*

Background

Literacy is a perennial focus of concern in modern society and differing views about 'standards' of literacy (Turner, 1995; Wray, 1995), how literacy should be taught (Meek, 1991; Dombey, 1995) and what constitutes literacy (Street, 1984, 1997; Lankshear, 1997) have been part of the educational debate for some time. The current agenda for literacy focuses upon how best to raise standards. While the latest overview of research evidence into standards suggests that the average reading ability of 9 year olds has remained much the same since 1948, it does also confirm the existence of 'a long tail of underachieving pupils' (Brooks *et al.*, 1996). Recent government initiatives concerning literacy have, therefore, set a target that by the year 2002 80% of 11 year olds should achieve level 4 in the Key Stage 2 reading SATs. Clear guidelines have been issued on how literacy is to be taught in primary classrooms via the literacy hour and the Framework of Teaching Objectives of the National Literacy Strategy [Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998]. The government has indicated that it also intends to take a close interest in the issues surrounding literacy at Key Stages 3 and 4 and that it thinks that 'literacy is a major issue for secondary schools' (DfEE, 1997, para. 108).

In January 1997, the Literacy Task Force published its interim report, *A Reading Revolution: How we can teach every child to read well* (Literacy Task Force, 1997).

Following the Labour Party's election to government in May of that year this interim report was followed by the final report of the Task Force, *The Implementation of the National Literacy Strategy* (DfEE, 1997). Although much of the report is devoted to literacy in the primary years, one section deals with secondary schools and sets out, as a statement of principle, that:

Every secondary school should specialise in literacy and set targets for improvement in English. Similarly, every teacher should contribute to promoting it. ... In shaping their plans it is essential that secondary schools do not see work on reading and writing as exclusively the province of a few teachers in the English and learning support departments. (para. 112)

The report also makes specific recommendations relating to secondary schools, including the following:

- there should be an HMI study to find evidence of where and how comprehensive, deliberate and intensive approaches work;
- there should be a GEST funded development programme to help secondary schools to improve literacy;
- the TTA should make a unit on the teaching of reading and writing a requirement of secondary teacher training and should develop criteria for such courses;
- when the National Curriculum is revised the Curriculum Authority 'should consider the case for ensuring that: explicit and systematic attention to the skills of reading and writing becomes an feature of the programmes of study in relevant subjects';
- this Authority should also consider whether secondary schools should be able to concentrate intensively on literacy in Year 7; and
- in their strategy for literacy, local education authorities should give attention to creating and maintaining co-operation between secondary schools and their feeder primary schools.

These recommendations and the ideas on which they are based have already begun to impact upon secondary schools. A series of leaflets outlining the use of language in all curriculum areas has already been published [School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), 1997] and 22 local education authorities have begun Key Stage 3 literacy initiatives financed by the DfEE Standards Fund. However, although the recommended HMI survey is now completed [Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), 1997] there is little evidence currently available as to what secondary classroom teachers think about literacy and about their roles in supporting literacy development. The current research evidence (for example Brookes & Goodwyn, 1998; Webster *et al.*, 1996) needs to be supplemented by a wider base if we are to answer questions such as:

- Do teachers from all secondary departments share the government's perception that literacy is a whole school issue?
- What do secondary teachers understand by the term 'literacy'?
- Do teachers feel they have the knowledge to support literacy?
- Do secondary teachers regard literacy levels as a matter of concern?
- What strategies do secondary teachers already employ to support the literacy development of their students?

Commentators on the implementation of change in schools (Hutchinson, 1989; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996) tend to argue that teachers' attitudes to new initiatives are only part of a complex mesh of influences that determine whether that change succeeds. However, those initiatives that are supported by the teachers who have to implement them are more likely to be successful and to produce more lasting change than those that are purely 'top-down' initiatives. Knowing what secondary teachers from across all departments know and feel about literacy might help inform the debate as to what initiatives are likely to be welcomed by teachers and which may prove more problematical. In order to provide some evidence to inform this debate, we undertook a questionnaire survey across all the departments of a number of secondary schools. This survey was designed as a first step in a longer programme of work in secondary classrooms focusing on literacy development.

The study

The Nuffield Extending Literacy (EXEL) project has been working in the field of literacy development with particular reference to non-fiction texts since 1992 (see Lewis & Wray, 1995; Wray & Lewis, 1997) and in 1997 began a further 2 year project entitled 'Using Literacy to Access the Curriculum', one of whose specific aims was to develop literacy work in secondary subject classrooms.

An initial questionnaire was designed to establish a baseline in terms of the views about and knowledge of literacy held by secondary school teachers. This was distributed to 342 teachers in eight secondary schools in London and Swindon.

The questionnaire consisted of four main sections:

- factual background about respondents such as age, gender etc.;
- information about respondents' training and the place of literacy work in that training;
- respondents' views about literacy as indicated by their reactions to a series of statements (with space to add comments if desired); and
- respondents' use of a variety literacy teaching strategies.

A final blank page provided space for teachers to add any comments they wished concerning literacy in the secondary school.

The anonymous questionnaires were distributed at staff meetings and a gathering point designated within the school for the later return of questionnaires. A total of 271 replies were received (a response rate of 79.2%) and these were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The teachers who returned the questionnaires had the characteristics shown in Table I

Results and Discussion

All Secondary Teachers Have a Role to Play in Improving Literacy

Asked whether they 'agreed', 'disagreed' or 'did not know' in response to a series of statements, 96% of respondents agreed that 'all secondary teachers have a role to play in improving literacy'. This overwhelming agreement with this statement suggests that most teachers would concur with the key principle stated in the Literacy Task Force report quoted above (DfEE, 1997). Only 2.6% disagreed. It may, of course, have been the case that the 71 teachers who did not return the questionnaire

TABLE I. Characteristics of the teacher sample

Teacher characteristics	Respondents to whom this applied (<i>n</i> = 271)	
Gender	Female	63%
	Male	37%
Age profile	< 30	29%
	30–40	22%
	> 40	48%
Teaching experience	≤ 3 years	28%
	3–10 years	19%
	> 10 years	52%

would also have disagreed with this statement, but even if that were the case, a very significant majority of the total sample (76%) took the positive view that improving literacy was part of their role as secondary teachers.

However, this acceptance of having a role to play in literacy development does not yet appear to be matched by secondary school practice. Brookes & Goodwyn (1998) discovered in a recent survey of secondary headteachers that whilst many respondent schools claimed to view literacy as a major priority, only a third of English departments had a developed policy on literacy and few schools mentioned cross-curricular policies, literacy policies or teaching strategies (although some did have whole school policies in areas such as spelling and marking). More positively, about a quarter of the schools in the Brookes and Goodwyn survey did claim to have set up literacy working parties with representatives from a range of departments.

The acknowledgement of their role in promoting literacy by the majority of our respondents is, however, tempered by these teachers responses to another statement, 'If primary teachers did their job correctly regarding literacy we could get on with teaching our subject specialism'. Whilst 47% disagreed with this statement, 28.1% agreed with it. This might imply that whilst the majority of secondary teachers recognise that, of necessity, they have 'a role to play in developing literacy', a sizeable minority would rather they did not have that role and would rather concentrate on their subject specialism.

Many of the 28% who agreed with the statement qualified their answers with comments supporting primary colleagues such as:

Primary schools need to improve a lot but it's not just their role to improve literacy... parents and other organisations have a role to play too.

But other replies betrayed feelings of anger and blame:

Primary schools need to concentrate more on the basics, not get kids running before they can walk.

Such responses perhaps illustrate a further reason for better contacts between secondary and primary schools. A clearer understanding on the part of secondary teachers of what primary teachers do may help teachers such as this to move on from a culture of blame.

Of the 47% of respondents who disagreed with the statement about primary schools, several added comments that showed a sophisticated concept of literacy. They recognised that literacy development did not stop when children left primary school, even for pupils with good standards of literacy.

At secondary level there are different literacies to be learned by students according to subject areas.

Secondary teachers have to plan for this as part of the learning of their students and a recognition of the role of subject-specific literacies should be an important element of any whole school literacy policy.

Secondary Teachers' Concerns About Literacy

Although only 28% of respondents seemed to blame primary schools, many of these secondary teachers did claim to be concerned about standards of literacy in their schools; 34% thought that literacy standards had fallen in the last 5 years, compared with 8% who thought standards had risen. Similarly, only 7% were actually happy with standards and 58% claimed to be worried about the literacy standards of more than half their Year 7 pupils. Of course, these are purely subjective views and may reflect the impact of many factors, such as publicly expressed concerns, local initiatives or personal experiences. Furthermore, asking someone if they are happy about something may prompt a negative response for a positive reason, for example, that they are unhappy about standards not because standards are low but because they are always striving for even higher standards. However, whatever the objective reality, it is evident that these secondary teachers were concerned about literacy and this led inevitably to concerns about how to support the literacy development of their pupils.

Strategies Secondary Teachers Use to Support Literacy

As far as my subject is concerned, as a department we are very aware of the importance of developing literacy. We encourage the use of specialist vocabulary. We display work and vocabulary that relates to it. We encourage students to use new words and broaden their vocabulary ...

We asked teachers to indicate their use of a range of text strategies (e.g. cloze procedure), teaching methods (e.g. teacher modelling) and other provision (e.g. having dictionaries available) that could be said to support literacy. The most commonly used techniques, claimed to be used sometimes or often by respondents are given in Table II.

Introducing key vocabulary is well established as a strategy for supporting literacy in all the schools involved. Its wide usage as a strategy may be because it has both a subject-specific dimension as well as a literacy dimension. Focusing on subject-specific vocabulary is an obvious way in which literacy support can be contextualised and subject teachers can see benefits in that it enhances subject knowledge as well as helping with literacy. Introducing 'key words' may also offer an immediate and relatively simple way into addressing literacy support for teachers who have no training in literacy. This high usage of the introduction of key words does, however, beg the question of how this strategy is used and of its effectiveness. Our observations in schools shows that often this does not go beyond identifying and displaying key words and teachers need help in recognising how to use such words in more interactive ways with students.

Interestingly, some of the most heavily used strategies could be interpreted as devices to avoid literacy problems rather than offering support for students as they

TABLE II. The most frequently used literacy support strategies

Strategy	Percentage using (<i>n</i> = 271)
Copying notes from the board	64.2%
Using library books as well as text books	66%
Modelling writing	68%
Reading aloud to pupils from text books	72.3%
Encouraging drafting	73.8%
Using graphic clues as prompts	78%
Checking readability levels	78.6%
Producing own work sheets to simplify the reading task	83.1%
Giving differentiated tasks	85.2%
Using brainstorming	88.5%
Displaying finished work	88.6%
Introducing key vocabulary	89.7%

engage with texts. Copying notes from the blackboard, producing worksheets to simplify the reading task and reading aloud from text books all reduce the literacy demands made on the student (although reading aloud can be positive if it is used as a guided/shared reading type activity). The 'retreat from print' found by Lunzer & Gardner (1979, 1984) is still apparent in secondary classrooms more than a decade later. Many teachers, it could be argued, have still not accepted the premise that they need to develop strategies that enable students to cope with the texts they encounter rather than minimise students' encounters with texts.

Further evidence that teachers are still helping students to avoid the demands of texts can also be seen in the strategies they chose not to use. Although many of the strategies listed in this questionnaire item were used at some time by the majority of the responding teachers, there were some that were rarely or never used by the majority of the respondents. These unknown or rarely used activities included two of the 'directed activities related to text' strategies (DARTs), text prediction (54.7% of the teachers claimed to use this rarely or never) and text restructuring (56.4% rarely or never). DARTs activities were developed by Lunzer & Gardner (1979, 1984) and are widely supposed to be commonplace in secondary school practice. A third DARTs activity, sequencing, was also rarely used by 49.6% of the respondents. Even cloze procedure, arguably the most well-known of the DARTs strategies, was used only 'sometimes' by 47% of the respondents whilst 46% claimed never to use it. Given their impact at the time of their introduction, their dissemination in published materials and the subsequent continued emphasis on these techniques in teacher training and INSET courses, it is surprising to see how infrequently many secondary teachers use them. This may reflect the amount of time needed to prepare such materials, the time needed to use such materials effectively in class or a lack of familiarity of these strategies on the part of the respondents. It could also be a manifestation of a lack of understanding of the need to get students to interact directly with challenging materials.

Other rarely used techniques include using mnemonics to teach spellings, having subject-specific mini-dictionaries available, modelling how to use study skills, modelling reading strategies such as scanning or making use of computers to support literacy. The use of modelling as a teaching strategy is one of the approaches heavily promoted in the National Literacy Strategy and giving secondary teachers the

TABLE III. Literacy support teaching strategies used significantly less by mathematics/science teachers than English/humanities teachers ($p < 0.05$)

Strategy	Science and mathematics teachers reporting that they rarely or never used this strategy	English and humanities teachers reporting that they rarely or never used this strategy
Have dictionaries available in class	99.2%	53.6%
Read aloud from non-text books on your subject	61.0%	29%
Teach scanning and skimming	60.0%	25.9%
Model note taking	60.0%	35.7%
Use library books in the classroom	51.6%	5.1%
Use text restructuring	38.9%	14.0%
Use text sequencing	31.0%	15.4%
Encourage drafting in writing	25%	6.3%
Use cloze procedure	25.0%	8.6%
Model how to write a particular piece of work	20.0%	10.1%

opportunities to see such teaching in action may be a way of helping such methods become more commonplace in the secondary school.

More detailed analysis of the data relating to strategy use did show statistically significant differences between departments. When the responses were cross-tabulated it could be seen that generally members of mathematics and science departments tended to use a more limited range of strategies than the sample as a whole. When comparing mathematics and science departments with English and humanities departments, for example, mathematics and science were less likely to use non-text books within their classrooms, to have dictionaries in their rooms, to encourage the use of drafting, to show how to scan or skim or to model how to write or take notes in their subject. Table III shows the different responses of these two sets of teachers.

This finding seems to confirm those of Webster *et al.* (1996), who discovered that secondary science teachers appeared to be more likely to believe that 'help with literacy should be provided outside the subject area' (p. 44). Our survey also suggests that science teachers are less likely to be providing literacy help within their classrooms. Whether these findings reflect a view that literacy is not their concern or whether they reflect an ignorance of literacy teaching strategies on the part of science and mathematics teachers it is hard to say.

Within this generalisation, however, there were exceptions; science and mathematics teachers who were clearly aware of the need to support their students and eager for guidance in the best way to proceed.

I would like to know more about teaching literacy skills. I am sure I cover quite a lot, but not always in a conscious way. I try to teach some aspects of literacy but am unsure whether the methodology I choose to do so is the most effective. (Science teacher)

This science teacher was not alone in feeling this way. That this should be so is not surprising if we look at the evidence we gathered on the attention given to literacy during the teachers' initial training.

The Role of Initial Training and INSET

Three quarters of the teachers surveyed said they had received little (31.7% had had one lecture) or no (44.3%) mention of literacy teaching during their initial teacher training courses. Respondents overwhelmingly felt that literacy work should be a compulsory part of secondary teacher training (87.5%) and so it seems reasonable to suppose that the government's recommendation on this matter will be widely welcomed by the profession. There were only 4% of respondents who thought there should not be any literacy element in their training.

A likely impact of the current government recommendations on literacy in the secondary school is a growing need for staff development for those teachers already in school and, although the questionnaire did not specifically ask about INSET, this was an issue that many teachers felt moved to raise in the comments sections:

Cross-curricular/whole school projects need to be reviewed and strategies/approaches streamlined into coherent, working policies. *Massive* INSET still needs to go on, to reinforce and to establish good practice across the whole teaching staff.

Given the range of views and practices that our survey has revealed, such INSET would seem vital if literacy development is to become an integral part of students' cross-curricular experiences.

Conclusion

Our survey has provided some evidence to show that the current interest in literacy at Key Stages 3/4 is timely. The majority of teachers are concerned about literacy in their schools and accept that they have a role to play in supporting pupils' literacy development. They often recognise that they need to develop their own expertise in this area. These issues bring with them implications for training, for resources and for the structure of the secondary timetable. There is a need to spread good practice within schools and between schools so that teachers can learn from each other. We hope to play our part in this process by publishing further articles on our findings.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by a grant from the Nuffield Foundation.

Correspondence: Maureen Lewis, EXEL Office, University of Plymouth, Rolle School of Education, Exmouth EX8 2AT, UK. Email: m.lewis-1@plymouth.ac.uk

REFERENCES

- BROOKS, G., PUGH, A. & SCHAGEN, I. (1996) *Reading Performance at Nine* (Slough, National Foundation for Educational Research).
- BROOKES, W. & GOODWYN, A. (1998) *Literacy in the secondary school*, paper given at the 1998 *British Educational Research Association Conference*, Queens University, Belfast.
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION and EMPLOYMENT (1997) *The Implementation of the National Literacy Strategy* (London, HMSO).
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION and EMPLOYMENT (1998) *The National Literacy Strategy Framework of Objectives* (London, HMSO).

- DOMBEY, H. (1995) Reading: what children need to learn and how teachers can help them, *Reading*, 27(3), pp. 2–8.
- HER MAJESTY'S INSPECTORATE (1997) *Secondary Literacy: a survey by HMI, Autumn Term 1997*, circulated draft. Now available on www.literacytrust.org.uk
- HUTCHINSON, B. (1989) Teachers' models of change and proposals for educational reform, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19, pp. 153–162.
- KENNEDY, C. & KENNEDY, J. (1996) Teachers' attitudes to change implementation, *System*, 24, pp. 351–360
- LANKSHEAR, C. (1997) *Changing Literacies* (Buckingham, Open University Press).
- LEWIS, M. & WRAY, D. (1995) *Developing Children's Non-fiction Writing: working with writing frames* (Leamington Spa, Scholastic).
- LITERACY TASK FORCE (1997) *A Reading Revolution: how we can teach every child to read well?* (London, Literacy Task Force).
- LUNZER, E. & GARDNER, K. (1979) *The Effective Use of Reading* (Oxford, Heinemann).
- LUNZER, E. & GARDNER, K. (1984) *Learning from the Written Word* (Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd).
- MEEK, M. (1991) *On Being Literate* (London, Bodley Head).
- SCHOOL CURRICULUM and ASSESSMENT AUTHORITY (1997) *Use of Language: a common approach* (London, SCAA).
- STREET, B.V. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- STREET, B.V. (1997) The implications of 'new literacy studies' for literacy education, *English in Education*, 31(3), pp. 45–59.
- TURNER, M. (1995) Finding out, in: C. GAINS & D. WRAY (Eds) *Reading: issues and directions* (Stafford, NASEN).
- WEBSTER, A., BEVERIDGE, M. & REED, M. (1996) Conceptions of literacy in primary and secondary school teachers, *Journal of Research in Reading*, 19(1), pp. 36–45.
- WRAY, D. (1995) A chapter of errors: a response to Martin Turner, in: C. GAINS & D. WRAY (Eds) *Reading: issues and directions* (Stafford, NASEN).
- WRAY, D. & LEWIS, M. (1997) *Extending Literacy: children reading and writing non-fiction* (London, Routledge).