

The characteristics of effective teachers of literacy

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Introduction

This article gives a preliminary report of the results of research, commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency, into the characteristics of teachers who can be shown to be effective in teaching literacy to primary pupils. The findings are based on a close study 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 in what effective teachers know, understand and do which enable 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;

Effective teaching and effective teachers

The literature on effective teaching has a number of predominant themes. These include school effect issues and issues related to the likely characteristics of effective teachers. Given the lack of value added data on which to base valid assertions, variations in children's literacy achievements must be treated cautiously. One recent

review suggests that a child's background (prior learning, intelligence, home background, parents etc.) contributes 85% to what is learned in school: the other 15% is contributed by schooling (Harrison, 1996). This is a pessimistic estimate and is confounded by the evidence that individual children vary hugely in terms of the experiences of literacy they get in school. It is also the case that particular school effects are unlikely to affect all children equally (Allington, 1984).

The project reported here focused on the contribution made by the teacher and the school to what children learn. Research on school effectiveness suggests that variations in children's literacy performance may be related to three types of effect: whole school, teacher, and methods/materials. Of these three, the consensus is that the effect of the teacher is the most significant (Barr, 1984, Adams 1990). Of the range of models put forward to explain the various components of school/teacher/pupil interactions, one we found particularly useful was the concept of 'curricular expertise', as advanced by Alexander, Rose & Woodhead (1992). By this they meant "the subject knowledge, the understanding of how children learn and the skills needed to teach subjects successfully." Effective teaching, they argued, depends on the successful combination of this knowledge, understanding and skill.

Most of the research into effective teaching is generic rather than specific to literacy teaching. In the 1970s a number of large scale studies in the USA attempted to look at the effects of the teacher by searching for links between teacher classroom behaviour and pupil achievement. (See Brophy & Good (1986) for a review). More recent

studies have taken a more complex view of the classroom and used multi-faceted methods of research. Studies such as that of Bennett et al (1984) looked at the classes of teachers deemed to be effective and Mortimer et al (1988) studied teaching in junior schools. At the same time official inspections by HMI have sought to identify and describe effective teaching.

Whilst the research offers little literacy-specific information it does give a range of findings concerning:

- teacher classroom behaviour, such as classroom management, task setting, task content and pedagogic skills - “the skills needed to teach subjects successfully”, in the words of Alexander, Rose & Woodhead (1992).
- teacher subject knowledge and beliefs, in which we can include content knowledge in a subject, an understanding of how children learn in that subject and the belief systems which interact with and enable such knowledge to be put into operation in the classroom.

Effective teaching and effective teachers of literacy

There have been numerous attempts to establish the nature of effective teaching in literacy. Most of these have begun by analysing the processes involved in being literate and from this putting forward a model to guide instruction in literacy (for example, Chall, 1967; Flesch, 1955; Goodman & Goodman, 1979). The argument has been that effective teaching in literacy is that which produces effective literate

behaviour in learners. This sounds like an eminently sensible position but its main problem has been the difficulty researchers and teachers have found in agreeing on what exactly should count as effective literate behaviour, especially in reading. The major disagreement has centred around the relative importance given in views of literacy to technical skills such as word recognition, decoding and spelling or to higher order skills such as making meaning. Such lack of agreement has led to proponents of radically different approaches to teaching literacy claiming superiority for their suggested programmes, but using very different criteria against which to judge the success of these programmes.

An example of this can be found in recent debates about literacy teaching. An approach known in the USA and other parts of the world as 'whole language' emphasises language processes and the creation of learning environments in which children experience authentic reading and writing (Weaver, 1990). Both linguistic and cognitive development are presumed to be stimulated by the experience of reading good literature and of writing original compositions. Whole language theorists and teachers stress that skills instruction should occur within the context of natural reading and writing rather than as decontextualised exercises. The development of literacy tends to be seen as a natural by-product of immersion in high quality literacy environments.

In contrast, other researchers and teachers argue that learning the code is a critical part of early reading and that children are most likely to become skilled in this when they

are provided with systematic teaching in decoding (e.g., Chall, 1967). There is growing evidence that such teaching increases reading ability (Adams, 1990), especially for children who experience difficulties in learning to read (Mather, 1992; Pressley & Rankin, 1994).

There have been several studies comparing the effectiveness of teaching programmes using a whole language approach and programmes emphasising traditional decoding. The evidence suggests that teaching based on whole language principles (i.e. the use of whole texts, good literature and fully contextualised instruction) does stimulate children to engage in a greater range of literate activities, develop more positive attitudes toward reading and writing, and increase their understanding about the nature and purposes of reading and writing (e.g. Morrow, 1990, 1991, 1992; Neuman & Roskos, 1990, 1992). Evidence also indicates, however, that whole language teaching programmes have less of an effect upon early reading achievement as measured by standardised tests of decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing (Graham & Harris, 1994; Stahl, McKenna, & Pagnucco, 1994; Stahl & Miller, 1989). Teaching which explicitly focuses on phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondences does result in improved performance on such standardised tests (Adams, 1990). The picture emerging from research is, therefore, not a simple one.

There is an issue which has potential bearing on understanding of the nature of effective literacy teaching and which may, in fact, be the focal point around which apparently conflicting research findings may be synthesised. This concerns the near

impossibility of finding, and thus testing, 'pure' teaching approaches in literacy. Close examination of many recent studies which appear to support the explicit teaching of decoding and comprehension strategies suggests that embedded in these programmes there are often many elements of what could be described as whole language teaching, including, for example, the reading of high quality children's literature and daily original writing by children (Pressley et al., 1991, 1992). Similarly, when the programmes described by whole language advocates are examined closely, it is quite apparent that they do contain a good deal of systematic teaching of letter-sound correspondences, for example (cf. Holdaway, 1979). These teaching approaches, in fact, are tending to become more and more alike and commentators such as Adams (1991) have suggested that there is no need for a division between teaching approaches styled as 'whole language' or 'explicit code teaching' in orientation. What has emerged in recent years is a realisation that explicit decoding and comprehension instruction are most effectively carried out in the context of other components.

Such rapprochement between previously contrasting positions suggests that effective literacy teaching is multifaceted (e.g., Adams, 1990; Cazden, 1992; Duffy, 1991; Stahl et al., 1994). That is to say that effective teaching often integrates letter- and word-level teaching with explicit instruction of comprehension processes and sets these within a context meaningful to the children in which they read and write high quality whole texts. Such an approach implies an informed selection by the teacher from a range of teaching techniques and approaches on the basis of a detailed understanding of the multifaceted nature of literacy and of the needs of a particular group of children.

It does not, as Rose (1996) points out, mean the naive use of a range of teaching methods in the hope that, like shotgun pellets, at least some of them will hit the target.

The likely characteristics and manifestations of effective teaching of literacy, therefore, can be described, to some extent. The focus of our research was to consider what it was that effective teachers knew and believed about this teaching, and how this contributed to their effectiveness.

Designing the study

In the research, we aimed to compare the practices, beliefs and knowledge of a group of teachers identified as effective at teaching literacy with those of a group of teachers not so identified. To do this we identified two main sample groups:

1. the main sample of 228 primary teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy;
2. the validation sample of 71 primary teachers not so identified.

The effective teachers were chosen from a list of teachers recommended as effective by advisory staff in a number of LEAs. The key criterion for this choice was whether we could obtain evidence of above-average learning gains in reading for the children in the classes of these teachers.

Teachers in both groups completed a questionnaire designed to enquire into their beliefs about literacy and literacy teaching approaches, their feelings about children's needs in literacy development, their reported use of a range of teaching techniques and their professional development experience in literacy.

We then identified sub-samples of the two main groups, including:

- 1 a sub-sample of 26 teachers from the group of teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy;
- 2 a validation sub-sample of 10 of the primary teachers from the validation group.

The teachers in both these sub-samples were twice observed teaching and then interviewed about each of these teaching episodes. The first observation/interview focused on teaching strategies, classroom organisation and the genesis of these in terms of the teachers' experiences of professional development. The focus in the second observation/interview was on lesson content and teachers' subject knowledge. During the second interview, teachers completed a 'quiz' designed to test their knowledge about aspects of literacy.

We also collected two sets of reading test results from the children being taught by these teachers. One of these sets indicated the children's reading abilities before they arrived in this teacher's class and the other these abilities after a year in this class.

These two sets of results were used to provide an objective measure of the effectiveness of these teachers in teaching literacy.

Main findings of the research

In the space available here all we can do is summarise the major findings of the research. Much greater detail about these findings can be found in the project report (Medwell et al, 1998, see below).

Teachers' subject knowledge in literacy

Both the effective teachers and the validation teachers knew the requirements of the National Curriculum well and could describe what they were doing in terms of these. The effective teachers, however, 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 and were concerned to contextualise this teaching and to present such structures functionally and meaningfully to children.

Even the effective teachers, however, had limited success at recognising some types of words (e.g. adverb, preposition) in a sentence and some sub-word units (e.g. phoneme) 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 out of the lesson context. 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. This is an important finding which we feel has implications for the content of teachers' continuing professional development.

Teachers were also asked to examine and judge samples of children's reading and writing. All the teachers were able to analyse the children's mistakes in these samples, but the way the two groups carried out this task was different. 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. 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. This suggests a firmer command of subject knowledge relating to literacy processes.

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 understanding of what was read and written.

The effective teachers translated their beliefs about purpose and meaning into practice by paying systematic attention to both the goals they had identified for reading and writing (the understanding and production of meaningful text) and to technical processes such as phonic knowledge, spelling, grammatical knowledge and punctuation. They tended to approach these technical skills in distinctive ways by using an embedded approach; that is, they gave explicit 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 with less coherent approaches were less likely to show how technical features of reading and writing fitted within a broader range of skills. They did not necessarily ensure that pupils understood the connections between the aims and the processes of reading and writing.

Coherence and consistency emerged as being an important and distinctive characteristic of the effective teachers in several senses:

- their beliefs were internally consistent;
- their practice lived up to their aspirations;
- their beliefs included a belief in making connections between the goals of literacy teaching and learning activities and the activities themselves.

Teaching practices: connections and contexts

The effective teachers were generally much more likely to embed their teaching of reading into a wider context and to understand and show how specific aspects of reading and writing contributed to communication. They tended to make such connections implicit and explicit. For example, when teaching skills such as vocabulary, word recognition and the use of text features, they made heavy use of whole texts or big books as the context in which to teach literacy. They were also very clear about their purposes for using such texts. They also 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.

Because of this concern to contextualise their teaching of language features by working together on texts, these teachers 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 re-focused 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.

Links with recent developments in literacy teaching

This research was begun before the National Literacy Strategy was put in place. There are, however, some specific points of connection between the model of literacy teaching implicit in the National Literacy Strategy and our research findings. We found that the effective teachers of literacy tended to teach literacy in lessons which were clearly focused on this subject (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 of the research

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 in

our findings 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. We feel strongly 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 practical philosophies and policies regarding literacy and its teaching, for example, through doing and using research. This contrasts with the predominantly 'short-burst' nature of much current professional development experience.

The content of in-service courses

The most effective in-service content seemed from our findings not to be that which focused on knowledge at the teachers' own level, but rather that which dealt with subject knowledge in terms of how this was 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 seems likely that having a greater command might help them further improve their teaching of literacy. Such terminology could 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 evidence from this project also suggests that the experience of being an English co-ordinator makes a significant contribution to teachers' development as literacy teachers. Schools need to consider how appropriate elements of this experience can be replicated for other teachers.

Conclusion

The research project described in this article is unique in this country in focusing not on features of the teaching of literacy but on the characteristics of the teachers who perform this teaching well. We feel that we have made a significant contribution to understandings in this area and, we hope, have initiated a debate about teacher preparation, knowledge and development which has the potential to lead to major improvements in the quality of literacy teaching. We welcome any comments or feedback on any of our findings.

Further information

This research was made possible by funding from the Teacher Training Agency. Further information about this project and a copy of the final report can be obtained from David Wray, School of Education, University of Exeter, Exeter, EX1 2LU. Tel. 01392 264973. Email: d.j.wray@exeter.ac.uk

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