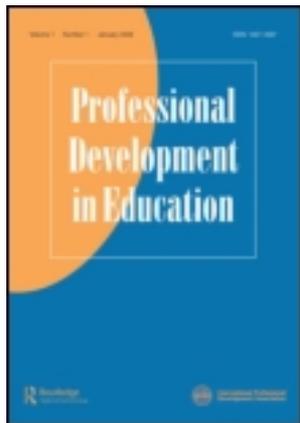


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### Professional development for literacy teaching: the evidence from effective teachers

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## **Professional Development for Literacy Teaching: the evidence from effective teachers**

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**ABSTRACT** High quality literacy teaching demands high quality literacy teachers and such teachers are the product of professional development. This article reports the results of an enquiry into the professional development experiences of teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy. The research was designed to identify key factors in what effective teachers of literacy knew and understood about literacy teaching and what they did in their classrooms, as well as to examine the professional development experiences which had contributed to their effectiveness. The results suggest that the effective teachers of literacy had been offered opportunities, beyond those provided in school, to extend and develop their knowledge and expertise in the teaching of literacy. Several implications about the form and content of such opportunities are drawn from the study.

High quality literacy teaching demands high quality literacy teachers. While not the only influence at work, it is almost certain that a major factor in raising standards of literacy will be the quality of the teaching of literacy that children experience, particularly during the primary phase of schooling. Any education system that attempts to raise literacy standards must give some thought to maximising the expertise of its teachers in teaching literacy. In order to direct improvements in the selection, training and professional development of teachers of literacy most profitably, a great deal can be learned from a study of those primary school teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy.

Such a study was the aim of the research upon which this article is based. The Effective Teachers of Literacy Project was commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) with the aims of:

identifying 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;  
examining aspects of continuing professional development that contribute to the development of effective teachers of literacy.

### **The Design of the Research**

The research was designed to answer these questions by gathering evidence in the following ways:

a questionnaire survey of the qualifications, experience, reported beliefs, practices and preferences in teaching literacy of a group of 228 teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy on the basis of a range of data including pupil learning gains;  
observations of literacy lessons given by 26 of these effective teachers of literacy;  
interviews with these 26 teachers about the content, structure and organisation of the lessons observed and about the knowledge underpinning them.

Similar data was also collected from a sample of 'ordinary' teachers (referred to as the validation group). Thus, the findings from the effective teacher sample could be compared to and validated against those from other teachers.

To identify the effective literacy teachers a number of steps were taken. We first asked for recommendations from education personnel in a number of areas of the country. Having achieved a list of over 600 teachers recommended as effective in the teaching of literacy, we then checked such external data sources as we could locate about these teachers and their schools. National test data from each school and external inspection reports were combed for any indications that the literacy teaching of these teachers might not be as effective as we had been led to believe. A number of teachers were deleted from the list as a result. The headteachers of the remainder were contacted and asked whether they agreed that the teacher in question was effective in teaching literacy and whether they had objective evidence to indicate this was the case. The key criterion here was whether headteachers could supply us with evidence, in the form of standardised reading test scores, of above-average learning gains in reading for the children in the classes of these teachers. Satisfactory responses to both these questions led to the inclusion of that teacher in the final sample of effective teachers of literacy.

Teachers in the validation group were selected to represent a range of effectiveness in teaching literacy. Primary schools in similar areas of the country and similar catchment areas to those of the effective teachers

were chosen and the Mathematics coordinators of these schools initially selected to be part of the validation sample.

Details about the research methods used and full presentation of the research findings in terms of the effective teachers' literacy teaching practices, subject knowledge and beliefs about literacy teaching can be found in the report of the project (Medwell et al, 1997). In the present article, we will present and discuss findings related to the professional development experiences that characterised these effective teachers of literacy.

## **Research Findings**

### *Teachers' Subject Backgrounds*

There were some differences between the effective teachers and the validation teachers in terms of their subject backgrounds.

A similar proportion of teachers in each group had qualifications at A-level (71.1% of effective teachers and 70.4 % of validation teachers) and the number of qualifications for each individual who had A-levels was similar. However, 66.7% of the effective teachers had A-level qualifications in subjects relevant to the content knowledge of literacy teaching (English, languages, linguistics, and communication studies), whilst only 46.4% of the validation teachers had such qualifications.

Of those teachers with degrees, 37.8% of the effective teachers reported that the main subject of their degree was English, languages or linguistics, subjects likely to have relevance to the content knowledge of literacy teaching. Only 10.3% of the validation sample listed these as their main degree subjects.

However, none of the teachers mentioned their A-level or degree studies as a source of professional development or preparation when interviewed. Whatever the longer-term effects of such subject backgrounds, the teachers themselves did not perceive them as very influential upon their subsequent teaching of literacy.

### *Professional Development Experience*

Most of the teachers had undertaken some in-service training focused on the teaching of literacy during the previous school year: 81% of the effective teachers of literacy and 70.4% of the validation teachers. The major difference between the two groups was in the number who had experienced substantial amounts of such in-service training. 16.8% of the effective teachers of literacy had experienced more than 5 days compared to 2.8% of the validation teachers.

At interview, all the effective teachers of literacy said they undertook literacy-focused in-service training regularly, and also

participated in local support networks and literacy projects. They were also likely to belong to centres and support groups. Several mentioned long courses, such as diploma and Masters' modules as a significant influence on their practice, although these may have taken place some time ago. They suggested that such courses had given them opportunities to examine their assumptions about literacy carefully and relate them to their practice. Only one of the validation samples mentioned this type of professional development in literacy.

The effective teachers of literacy also said they found regular attendance at shorter courses useful, but for different reasons. They suggested these courses were likely to 'keep them up to date' and in contact with new requirements in literacy teaching, rather than offer a focus for examining their views and practices.

The effective teachers generally talked positively about the local education authority (LEA) in-service courses they had experienced:

*So I would say that the in-service courses (the LEA) run are excellent. They've got a good English team and I would say they have helped enormously. Some sessions are specifically for language coordinators, some for primary teachers in the borough. They come into school, the support team. They do really good practical sessions that we see the point of.*

They also praised LEA-based support from advisers and advisory teachers within the school. The small number who had been involved with longer-term literacy courses at local Universities also spoke enthusiastically about these.

Teachers were also asked about their experience of and their views about a variety of types of provision for professional development in literacy. Their experiences can be seen in Table I.

Forms of in-service provision	Effective teachers who had experienced this (%)	Validation teachers who had experienced this (%)
Lectures	95.1	89.0
Practical workshops	92.3	86.2
Opportunities to try out new ideas in the classroom	98.7	98.5
Practical experience with feedback from an expert.	75.8	67.2
Working alongside another teacher	77.2	73.0
In-service session led by colleagues	79.1	86.3
Observing other teachers in action	77.8	83.7
Guided research	63.3	43.9

Table I. Proportions of teachers with experience of various forms of in-service provision.

The effective teachers were more likely to have taken part in literacy related lectures, workshops and guided research. The validation teachers were more likely to have experienced in-service sessions led by colleagues and to have observed other teachers in action. This distinction suggests that the effective teachers were more likely than the validation teachers to have experienced in-service courses outside their own schools.

#### *The Content of Professional Development in Literacy*

In the questionnaire we asked teachers to identify from a list the areas of literacy teaching in which they had experienced professional development and in which they felt this had been useful. Table II shows the percentage of both groups who had experienced professional development in each area and the percentage that had found this useful.

Content area	Effective teachers experienced (%)	Effective teachers rating these useful (%)	Validation teachers experienced (%)	Validation teachers rating these useful (%)
Phonological awareness	86.3	87.4	77.1	91.4
Knowledge of grammar	84.4	66.5	72.2	65.9
Reading for information	94.4	90.9	85.7	83.3
Writing purposes and forms	96.9	98.6	97.1	93.7
Spelling development	92.1	90.0	80.0	86.5
Reading processes	96.2	95.8	91.0	91.7
Writing processes	97.8	97.2	92.3	96.7
Assessment	97.7	89.1	95.3	83.3
Children with literacy problems	90.6	85.3	82.8	88.6

Table II. Experience and value of professional development in literacy areas.

The figures indicate that, with the exception of the content areas 'assessment' and 'writing purposes and forms', the effective teachers were slightly more likely to have had professional development experience in these important aspects of literacy teaching and learning.

The majority of teachers from both groups had found their professional development experience related to these topics useful and there were no major differences between the two groups' ratings. The

area that both groups seemed to have found less useful was *knowledge of grammar*.

To investigate these findings further, we probed teachers' responses to their in-service training during interview. Of the 26 effective teachers, 12 said that they felt they had learned some knowledge about language, in particular, knowledge of word classes, but had been unable to retain this knowledge.

*I did know all this stuff. We did courses on it a few years back. You know, when it was, well, when the LEA were really keen on this sort of thing. Of course it was before I was into English so much. But I just don't use it, so of course it's gone. I don't know that I need it but I know that if I do need a particular word I can look it up. I've done that in the past, mostly when I taught juniors. I make really sure I know what I'm talking about before I do it with the kids. It's like the science now, isn't it?*

*I was OK on it straight after the course, but it is impossible to remember for some reason. I really believe it's because it simply isn't how we do it in class. I mean, if I get ideas from a course, or if the content of a course is really relevant to school I do use it. I was very interested when I did that KAL (knowledge about language) course because I felt I improved my own knowledge. But this detail is not the sort of thing I would use in class or the others (other teachers) are going to benefit from me bringing back.*

Most of the validation teachers gave very similar explanations for their feelings about what they recognised as their difficulties with knowledge about language (KAL).

The results of the questionnaire and the comments made by teachers suggest two main problems with training courses about KAL or grammar. First, teachers may fail to perceive the relationship between explicit content at their own level in areas such as grammar, and the material they see as important for them to teach. Secondly, if, as our data indicates, effective teachers tend to teach areas such as grammar within the context of work on whole texts, they may not make the connection between the grammatical knowledge they are taught on courses and the classroom activities they are accustomed to employ. In-service courses on grammar would seem more likely to have a longer-term impact if they were planned with these connections deliberately in mind.

#### *Becoming the School English Coordinator*

One of the most important factors in the development of the effective teachers of literacy was undoubtedly becoming the school English coordinator:

*Taking on the role of coordinator ... I've thought to myself, 'well, I'm going to find out more' so I've read more, I've looked into things more and, I can't say when it happened, I've started to look more at what the child can do. I think I take into account more what the child has to do, the skills they need. In my first few years I probably would have introduced things but not been aware of the skills the child would need.*

They gave a number of possible reasons why this was significant:

Support from school colleagues:

*Being part of staff teams who are open to new ideas, but analysed them for me before we actually got on any bandwagon. We had people who were deliberately devil's advocate. I remember when we were going for a new approach at my previous school. We talked about it at length, got in advisors who helped us and sorted it out amongst ourselves, but there was not one person who just said, 'Oh, the old fashioned ways are the best'. Luckily, I've always worked with people who want to know what's best and form their own opinions.*

Being able to see what colleagues in and out of school did in class – something they felt would only be possible for the coordinator:

*I think it's the opportunity to go and see other people doing it. From being English coordinator and having responsibility for something. Once a term we have a day for us. I mean it might be doing files and paperwork. But on the other hand I do like to try and go and see other people. You do pick up ideas of how to do things. I've learnt a lot more about Y3 and their abilities from going over to the infant school and seeing Y2. I'm KS2 trained but seeing the ways they read and their sessions and the stimulus in the classroom. I try to recreate that in my teaching.*

Becoming part of a network of coordinators who kept in touch.

Receiving regular bulletins and support from county advisory staff and services.

Personal interest.

Becoming involved with initiatives such as the Primary Language Record or literacy projects.

There seemed to be a great difference in the type, duration, content and forms of professional development offered to English coordinators and to other teachers in the schools we visited. One teacher expressed her concern about this issue:

*But I'm afraid it's all gone wrong, because the only courses you get to go on are consultant courses. I'm finding that as the language consultant I'm expected to go on courses concerned*

*with language but the other members of staff don't get those opportunities, whereas I feel when I was younger I could go on any courses I wanted. So I'm concerned that they're not doing enough basic in-service about language.*

Such a concern, if accurate (and the evidence of our research is that it does represent a common pattern), suggests a worrying 'vicious cycle' in the professional development experience of teachers who are not English coordinators for their schools (with, naturally, a parallel 'virtuous cycle' for those who *are*.) Teachers who do not exhibit particular strengths in the teaching of literacy, and who therefore are unlikely to be selected as English coordinators, are less likely to be given access to the in-service experiences that can help them strengthen their teaching of literacy. If an aim of continuing professional development is to try to make *all* primary teachers effective teachers of literacy, then this feature of course provision seems to need some attention.

#### *Other Factors*

At interview, many of the teachers offered very general explanations of their development as effective teachers of literacy and were unable to select the significant factors.

*Well, mainly by watching other teachers I suppose. Certainly, since I've been here I've had the opportunity to watch other teachers working and have picked up things from them otherwise – experience. Trying things out as you go along and finding certain things work and developing them really.*

*I do read a lot of things. I read a lot of research and the Times Ed. and I see what everyone else is doing and I like trying out different things to see what works for me.*

*A combination of seeing other teachers teach, reading books and experimenting in my class to see what works best. So there's no one single factor, it's what works best. It's mostly articles and stuff I read these days, although I do look at the books I had when I trained 6 years ago. I had a Margaret Meek one that really influenced me.*

When probed about the important aspects of their professional development in the last academic year the effective teachers of literacy were most likely to identify a particular course, school-based session or the opportunity to discuss school-based matters with colleagues. The validation teachers were more likely to identify the support of another member of staff and the opportunity to talk to other members of staff.

### Summary

From our study of these teachers, a clear distinction emerged between the effective teachers of literacy and the validation teachers in terms of the professional development experiences they had had. In general, the effective teachers had been offered opportunities, beyond those provided in school, to extend and develop their knowledge and expertise in the teaching of literacy. For the validation teachers, these opportunities tended to have been limited to those provided in school. Much of this difference can be accounted for by the fact that most of the effective teachers of literacy we studied were or had been English coordinators in their schools, a position of relative privilege in terms of access to literacy focused professional development. The clear implication of this finding is that, to raise expertise levels in all teachers of literacy, some professional development opportunities at least need to be channelled to those teachers not already identified as expert.

### Implications for Further Development

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

- access to in-service courses;
- the nature of professional development experience;
- the content of in-service courses;
- the role of the subject coordinator in the school.

#### *Access to In-service Courses*

Over a number of years now there has been a tendency for literacy curriculum specialists (school English coordinators) to be targeted for in-service opportunities in literacy. This targeting has been implemented for very good reasons. There were clear needs, following the introduction of the National Curriculum, for a heightening of subject expertise, and for ensuring that at least one member of staff in a school was sufficiently expert and knowledgeable about the teaching of a subject to be able to offer support and advice to colleagues in this teaching.

There is some evidence from our findings that this policy of targeting in-service opportunities has had a positive effect. The effective teachers of literacy in our sample, over 70% of who were English coordinators for their schools, consistently reported having benefited from the in-service opportunities available to them. They claimed to have been able to pass on some of their expertise through running or organising in-school in-service sessions for their colleagues, and through

offering general support to these colleagues in such areas as selecting resources for literacy and implementing school policies.

Our evidence does suggest, however, that a rather worrying corollary to this policy has been that teachers who had not been designated as school English coordinators were somewhat restricted in the in-service opportunities available to them. For many, these were limited to those arranged within the school, during after-school sessions or on occasional school training days. Given the high value which the effective teachers placed upon their experiences of in-service courses, it seems that non-specialists were missing out on opportunities for their expertise in teaching literacy to be improved. There is a 'Matthew effect' in operation here: the rich (in literacy expertise) tend to get richer, while the poor (perhaps a majority of primary teachers) fall further and further behind the most up to date thinking and practice. This does not seem a satisfactory state of affairs. It is true, after all, that *all* primary teachers are teachers of literacy and, especially in the case of younger children, have an enormous responsibility for ensuring appropriate literacy development in children. Thus it seems to follow that *all* teachers need professional development in this crucial area.

#### *The Nature of Professional Development Experience*

Two points stand out in this area. First, we have some evidence of the benefits in developing and strengthening teaching expertise in literacy of teachers being brought together in structured discussion groups. These often took the form of regular meetings between teachers from a range of professional situations to discuss particular issues in literacy teaching and a prime example of such meetings were the English coordinators' groups which several of our effective teachers belonged to. Working in such groups also sometimes involved watching other teachers teach, and being watched teach in turn. There is evidence from other sources of the positive benefits of such supportive groups. They were at the heart, for example, of the success of the EXEL project (Wray & Lewis, 1997) in developing and spreading expertise in extending children's work with non-fiction texts. They were also vital to the success of national projects such as the National Writing Project and, later, the National Oracy Project. This approach to professional development might be more widely adopted if part of the funds dedicated to continuing professional development were earmarked to support such structured groups, perhaps by allowing teachers to be released occasionally from their class responsibilities to take part in meetings with other teachers for specific purposes.

Secondly, a number of the effective teachers of literacy had experienced involvement either in long courses about the teaching of literacy, such as CAPS or MEd courses, or in literacy projects, such as the

development and trialing of the Primary Language Record. These experiences, as well as having given these teachers access to sources of extensive expertise, both personal and resource-based, had also given them the time and space to reflect in a structured way upon their own approaches to literacy teaching and to develop their personal philosophies. Where teachers had worked out philosophies regarding literacy and its teaching, these did seem to act positively as a coordinating force in their day-to-day practices, and this coordination in turn led to increased focus in the literacy teaching adopted. Clearly, involving more teachers in longer courses and study programmes in literacy has very significant resource implications and may not be possible to the degree to which might be thought ideal. In fact, there has been a marked decrease over a 20-year period in the number of teachers released from their schools for longer periods of study. What is more feasible and has emerged as a professional development policy quite recently is the deliberate facilitation and encouragement of teachers who want 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 effective teachers in this study reported that they found in-service courses on such topics as grammar less useful than courses on other topics. This is indicative of a more general implication of the research that the most effective in-service content is not 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 opportunities to try out new ideas in the classroom. This does not mean, however, that in-service courses should be *only* practical – that is, entirely classroom-based. In aiming to develop teachers' ability to teach literacy more effectively, they should be mindful of the importance, discussed earlier, of the teacher as a reflective professional. The more teachers are themselves aware of the underpinnings, theoretical and philosophical, of how they act in classrooms, the more likely they are to take a coherent approach to their literacy teaching which seems to pay most dividends. Thus, there has to be a place in an in-service course, however practical its focus, for teachers to debate and work out the place of practical ideas in their personal, reasoned armoury of teaching strategies.

*The Role of the Subject Coordinator 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 coordinator in his/her school. This puts the teacher into the position of:

- receiving more extensive opportunities for professional development;
- having the opportunity to learn from explaining ideas to other teachers and from watching other teachers teach;
- being vested with an expertise to which they have then to live up;
- being the gatekeeper in the school for new ideas and resources.

Such a position strongly encourages the development of specialist expertise and one suggestion for a way of broadening the possession of this expertise would be for schools to rotate the role of English coordinator every few years. In several of the schools we visited as part of the project, such rotation of responsibilities was already practised and the teachers involved were certainly building up their range of curriculum expertise. In one school, for example, four teachers were identified as effective teachers of literacy. Of these, one was the current English coordinator, two had been in the past (they were now responsible for other curriculum areas), and one was in her second year of teaching. Rotation of responsibilities (and of year groups taught) was a deliberate school policy and seemed to be having the desired effect of spreading expertise.

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