



Implementing Effective Literacy Initiatives in the Secondary School

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SUMMARY *Concerns about literacy are currently high on the political agenda in the UK. With the National Literacy Strategy now in place in primary schools, attention is being focused upon how pupils in secondary schools can be supported in continuing to develop their literacy skills. In this article we will briefly consider the current state of literacy within secondary schools and the different curriculum elements that need to be part of a secondary literacy initiative. We examine the key factors, identified through research and good practice, which will influence the successful implementation of a literacy strategy within secondary schools and indicate how such factors might translate into effective practice within schools and classrooms.*

Introduction

There is currently much interest in the issue of literacy at Key Stage 3 (KS3). Such interest is timely for it reflects a response to several factors evident within the UK educational system. These include:

- a renewed focus upon literacy in primary schools with the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy [Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998a];
- evidence of a need for secondary schools to pay greater attention to developing the literacy of their pupils (DfEE, 1997, 1998b, 1998c);
- evidence of a recognition from secondary schools themselves that they need to give greater attention to literacy (Brookes & Goodwyn, 1998; Lewis & Wray, 1999);
- a renewed focus upon the role of subject departments within secondary schools in developing literacy (Webster *et al.*, 1996; School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1997; Bearne, 1999);
- the emergence of a growing number of initiatives to promote literacy in the secondary schools, such as the 22 DfEE KS3 Literacy Pilot Projects in 1998–99; local LEA initiatives such as the ‘Lewisham Literacy 2000 Project’ or the Wirral ‘Key Skills Project’; the work of the Nuffield EXEL Project (Wray & Lewis, 1997); work being undertaken by government agencies such as the Basic Skills Agency and literacy projects initiated by individual schools.

In this article we will briefly review the current state of literacy within secondary schools and the different curriculum elements that need to be considered when introducing a whole school literacy policy into secondary schools. We will then go on to examine the key factors, identified through research and analysis of good practice, which influence the successful implementation of a literacy strategy within secondary schools. We will indicate, based on our own recent work in secondary schools, how such factors might translate into effective models and practical strategies. School effectiveness research has had a major impact upon our understanding of how successful schools work but it is also important that teachers can see how ‘abstract’ factors identified as factors of successful schools (such as ‘shared goals’ or ‘high expectations’) translate into practical action in the classroom.

The Current State of Literacy in English Secondary Schools

The issue of a decline in literacy standards within the UK has been hotly debated for years and it is unnecessary to rehearse these arguments again here. What the most recent statistics seem to show is that, whatever the historical comparisons might be, in both national and international reviews of current evidence standards of literacy in the UK are not high enough for a sizeable proportion of our students.

Statistics produced by Ekinsmyth and Bynner (1994), ALBSU (1995) and UNESCO (1999) broadly agree that between one sixth and one eighth of adults in Britain have literacy problems. Current evidence from the national testing of pupils in English at 11 and 14 years indicates that between 30 and 40% of pupils fail to achieve the reading standards expected for their age group. In writing an even larger proportion of pupils do not attain the average score for their age group (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999a, b).

To this statistical evidence we can add the comments of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) recorded in their *Review of Secondary Education 1993–97* (DfEE, 1998b). HMI found that nation-wide ‘standards of reading are good in six out of ten schools (*but*) they remain unsatisfactory in around one in seven’. With regard to writing, the report comments that ‘Standards of writing, however, were judged to be weaker, with about one fifth of secondary schools having pupils whose standards in writing were poor or very poor’.

There seems, therefore, to be evidence from a variety of sources that secondary schools do need to give greater consideration to supporting the literacy development of their pupils.

A Multi-stranded Approach

There appear to be four main areas of potential development in literacy work for schools to consider:

1. the specific teaching of literacy within English and related departments;

2. the subject-specific literacy demands within individual departments;
3. cross-curricular issues of literacy which can be supported by all departments;
4. a whole school literacy awareness strand that concentrates on creating, and maintaining, a positive ethos towards literacy and a high public profile for literacy within the institution.

Each of these can be regarded as both a separate and/or an interwoven strand. Depending upon their individual circumstances schools may concentrate upon any or all of these strands but the use of a multi-stranded approach appears to be emerging as a crucial factor in those schools assessed by HMI as having an effective literacy strategy (Robinson, 1999). So how can secondary schools implement such an approach?

School Effectiveness and Literacy Development

A review of the research literature reveals a broad consistency in the findings of school effectiveness research, school improvement research and research into the qualities of effective teachers of literacy about factors that can make a difference to teaching and learning. Based on extensive literature reviews, Sammons *et al.* (1995) identified 11 key features of effective schools and Reynolds (1998) a similar list. 'Effectiveness' factors are also identified in the most recent studies on effective literacy teaching (Medwell *et al.*, 1998; Wragg *et al.*, 1998). Whilst any such list cannot provide a recipe to be applied wholesale, the major factors of effective schools and effective teaching of literacy include:

- effective and purposeful leadership;
- shared goals within the school/classroom community;
- the creation of a learning environment;
- a concentration on teaching and learning;
- purposeful teaching with clear learning objectives;
- high expectations;
- giving positive reinforcement;
- ensuring progress is monitored;
- supporting the professional and pedagogical needs of staff. (based on Sammons *et al.*, 1995, p. 8)

We will discuss each of these factors in turn, but consideration of universal factors such as these must entail an awareness of the context specificity of individual schools. Such context-specific factors might include the socio-economic status of the pupils, the type of school, the location of the school, the school's view of itself as failing or succeeding and the history and culture of the school (Reynolds, 1998, p. 157). In introducing a literacy strategy, therefore, schools must be sensitive to their local situations. They will need to know where

they are starting from and where they are aiming to get to and to understand how their goals relate to national initiatives.

Shared Vision and Goals

Defining the problem is an essential first step in implementing a successful literacy policy. An understanding of the school's starting point can be obtained by undertaking whole school and departmental audits and by making use of the evidence on individual pupils to define target groups for any initiative. Audits can have both an information gathering and a consciousness-raising impact, both of which can have an important role in developing a shared vision and goals within the school community.

Unity of purpose is associated with improved educational outcomes (Rutter *et al.*, 1979), as is consistency of practice and common approaches across teachers and subjects (Cohen, 1983; Mortimore *et al.*, 1988). School and departmental audits can highlight existing shared practice and areas for development (for example consistency or lack of consistency in the marking/teaching of spelling). Such audits are also imperative because of the differential impact of school level initiatives and classroom level initiatives. Evidence is emerging that variation in terms of teaching effectiveness and pupil achievement across departments and teachers *within* secondary schools is much greater than the variations between schools (Fitz-Gibbon, 1996). The active involvement of all departments would therefore seem vital if a literacy initiative is to be effective. The DfEE recognised the importance of this whole school approach when, in outlining its plans for secondary schools (DfEE, 1997), it stated:

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 creation of a shared vision and goal can be developed by the establishment of a school literacy committee with representation from each department. Such committees will have two roles: to initiate and lead literacy development and to work towards the creation of a written whole school policy. HMI have identified the importance of formalising literacy initiatives into a public 'institutionalised' policy document as a key factor in those secondary schools they deemed to be effective in supporting literacy (Robinson, 1999). The key here may not be the document itself, but rather the process involved in creating such a document which demands collaboration across departments. Shared goals are thereby made explicit and it is more likely that departments and teachers will have more than a token allegiance to them if they have had a hand in drawing them up.

From our own observations in schools we would add a further dimension

to the work of more successful literacy committees. They have a role in keeping literacy at the forefront of colleagues' minds. This might be via a monthly literacy newsletter to all staff, via a regular slot at whole school staff meetings, through organising literacy events such as author visits and book fairs or by planning a programme of INSET sessions. Secondary schools often have several initiatives running simultaneously and the literacy committee can re-focus minds upon their shared literacy vision and aims.

Leadership

Involvement of the senior management team is another vital factor in determining the success or failure of any initiative (Gray, 1990; Fullan, 1991; Caul, 1994). This does not necessarily mean that a headteacher must personally lead a literacy initiative. Most effective heads are able to delegate responsibility (Caul, 1994), but they must be seen to give status and support to initiatives. Without this it is less likely that any initiative will be long lasting. There are a number of ways in which status can be signalled, such as by the appointment of a literacy coordinator within the school, the allocation of a budget to support the initiative, public support by the head for the work of the literacy coordinator and/or committee and a lead from the head in encouraging liaison when appropriate with outside agencies that may offer support, such as LEAs, universities and consultants (Weindling, 1989).

The Learning Environment

The impact of the learning environment upon the successful implementation of a literacy policy cannot be separated from the impact of the learning environment upon the ethos of the school generally. Factors which enhance learning generally will enhance literacy learning. However, we can identify a particular literacy dimension within the school environment. The Effective Teachers of Literacy project (Medwell *et al.*, 1998) identified the importance of creating 'literate environments' in classrooms. In secondary schools the creation of an attractive, literate, working environment might include ensuring that all classrooms (not just English classrooms) are seen as places where literacy is supported. Features to attend to in classrooms include the provision of literacy materials, the range of books on offer, the types of displays created, the layout of the room to ensure pupils can see the board/OHP, etc. Other features include the creation of a print-rich environment in the public areas and corridors and the celebration of literacy via displays such as book choice boards and reading and book posters around the whole school. Many secondary schools have initiated practical measures such as permanent display boards being covered with protective perspex sheets so that displays can withstand the daily wear and tear of busy and crowded corridors. Valuing literacy displays in this way gives many subtle messages about the importance of literacy and its status within the school community and the wider world.

Concentration on Teaching and Learning

The importance of looking at teaching and learning within a literacy strategy is obvious. Many studies have shown a correlation between such a concentration and school and teacher effectiveness (Mortimore, 1993; Creemers, 1994). In literacy, approaches to teaching such as teacher modelling and teacher-guided reading and writing (as used in the primary National Literacy Strategy) are new to many secondary teachers. The active literacy teaching strategies exemplified in DARTs activities and the work of the EXEL project (Wray & Lewis, 1997) are still only used by a minority of secondary teachers (Lewis & Wray, 1999). Attempts to establish a literacy initiative must therefore address directly issues of teaching and learning. It is useful for secondary teachers to recognise that many of the processes involved in supporting literacy are also processes involved in developing learning. For example, activating prior knowledge before working on a new unit of work is a vital part of learning as it helps pupils make explicit links between what they already know and new information. It also has a specific literacy dimension in that it encourages collaborative oral work, can provide a contextualised opportunity to introduce key words and phrases and makes it possible for the pupils' subsequent reading to be more purposeful and focused.

Purposeful Teaching

Quality teaching is clearly at 'the heart of effective schooling' (Sammons *et al.*, 1995 p. 15). High quality teaching can be characterised by several factors, one of which is clarity of purpose (North West Regional Education Laboratory, 1990). Making the literacy objective of a lesson explicit helps do this. Schools that have embarked upon a literacy development strategy almost inevitably find that eventually departments are involved in revisiting schemes of work and identifying literacy and learning objectives within their planning.

High Expectations

Whilst positive expectations of pupil achievement have been identified as one of the most important characteristics of effective schools (United States Department of Education, 1987) the link between teacher expectations and pupil achievement is not simple. Expectations do not directly impact upon pupil achievement. Rather, the attitude of teachers may impact upon pupil self-esteem (Bandura, 1992), influence the content of their lessons (Tizard *et al.*, 1988) and act upon teachers themselves by enabling them to feel that they can exercise some control over pupils' difficulties through an active teaching role (Mortimore, 1994).

Within the context of a literacy strategy these insights from research highlight the importance of secondary teachers having a clear understanding of the literacy achievements of individual pupils and an understanding of what standards a literate 12-year-old should be achieving. This has several practical

consequences. One is that literacy information on individual pupils must be made available to all teachers. A second is that secondary staff should know what a Level 4 in English represents in practical terms. In one of the DfEE KS3 pilot literacy projects, this knowledge was introduced to staff by getting teachers from all departments to undertake a Year 6 English SAT test and to compare their own results with those of pupils assessed at different levels. Many secondary teachers were surprised at what was demanded of pupils and recognised that their own expectations of their pupils may have been too low.

Positive Reinforcement

Strategies to increase pupils' motivation and self-esteem are a major factor in influencing achievement (Bandura, 1992). Low levels of literacy are often associated with low self-esteem, with pupils tending to consider themselves stupid and unable to progress with literacy. Many secondary schools have introduced literacy award schemes (for example being offered privileges in return for reading a certain number of books). The impact of such schemes appears to lie in the positive reinforcement they can offer pupils.

Positive, rather than negative, feedback is one issue that schools need to address when looking at school assessment, marking and spelling policies. One of the DfEE KS3 pilot projects has been exploring the use of an assessment instrument for plotting literacy development across the curriculum based on the idea of the 'positive statement banks' first suggested by the Birmingham LEA Assessment Unit (Winchester, 1995). Other schools have introduced literacy mentors who spend time talking to individual pupils about their literacy, helping them set individual targets and monitor their own progress. This is helpful not only in providing opportunities for positive feedback but also makes the pupils active participants in the process. Giving pupils some responsibility for (Rutter *et al.*, 1979) and some control over their work (Brookover *et al.*, 1979) appear to be significant in motivating pupils.

Monitoring and Evaluating

If a school has a shared set of goals and expectations concerning literacy, it becomes possible to set targets and monitor how both the school as a whole, departments and individual pupils have moved towards such targets. Such monitoring appears to be important in that it focuses the attention of staff, pupils and parents upon the goals. It can also inform, and make more effective, future planning and can help create an ethos that regards these goals as important and worthwhile (Lezotte, 1989; Scheerens, 1992). At a school level this may entail a clear literacy development plan, with identifiable targets, a success indicator, a time scale for action and a key person or department identified as being responsible for initiating action. At an individual pupil level it may involve literacy logbooks for targeted pupils in which their individual or group targets are recorded, positive feedback given by teachers and mentors and

progress reviewed. Teachers, mentors, pupils and parents can play their role in this monitoring and evaluating by adding their comments on how far goals have been achieved.

Staff Development

It seems obvious that effective teachers need to be learners as well as teachers, keeping up to date both in their subject and with new understandings about how pupils learn. The need for secondary teachers to understand how to support literacy development is widely recognised. However, a recent survey (Lewis & Wray, 1999) found that three quarters of the secondary teachers questioned 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. The need for focused in-service courses on literacy is apparent from such findings.

However, research studies that have examined staff development have generally concluded that in-service training 'needs to be school based if it is to have a lasting impact' (Sammons *et al.*, 1995, p. 23). The most effective in-service training would appear to be ongoing and focused upon improving classroom practice, i.e. theory is embedded in or clearly linked to classroom practice.

In the schools in which we have been working (Lewis & Wray, 2000) the in-service model has been that of school-based, whole staff sessions followed by departmental development sessions over several weeks which have looked at the literacy demands of a specific unit of work. This culminates in a revised unit of work being taught and evaluated for its impact upon student learning and literacy. The members of staff involved then report back to the rest of the staff on what they have done. In this way, new ideas are shared, literacy as a 'theme' is constantly revised within the school and the existing expertise of staff is acknowledged and built upon.

Such a model of in-service training and development is expensive and time consuming. However, there are many studies that show that one-off presentations by outside experts, although well received on the day, can have a limited long-term impact (Fullan, 1991). Improving schools, including improving literacy within schools, is a long rather than a short-term project and needs to be properly funded if the most effective forms of in-service training are to be encouraged.

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to bring together the factors identified from school effectiveness, school improvement and literacy research to begin to outline how schools might develop successful literacy initiatives. To schools' planned implementation and development of a policy we must add practical support from outside agencies via extra resources and a public acknowledgement of the

importance of the task schools are being asked to undertake. The commitment of teachers will always be necessary to the success of new initiatives.

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