

Pupils' perspectives on literacy teaching

David Wray* and Jane Medwell
Institute of Education, University of Warwick, UK

The views of the learners are arguably the most important consideration in planning for classroom literacy instruction, yet they are often ignored by policy-makers and by teachers. In order to match the literacy curriculum to the learners, it is essential for teachers to consider the programmes they offer from the learners' points of view. This article begins an exploration of some of what is known about learners' perspectives on literacy and literacy teaching, presenting some preliminary findings of a research study into pupils' views of the literacy hour.

Introduction

Nationally imposed curricula for literacy are now a significant feature in the educational landscape in many countries. These national approaches have received strong criticism, especially because of their 'one size fits all' model. Criticism internationally has generally focused on the point that such approaches undervalue the contribution that skilful, creative teachers can make to effective literacy instruction.

But these nationally imposed curricula for literacy also make it difficult for literacy teachers to take account of the perceptions of the pupils they teach about literacy and its teaching. Learners' perceptions of literacy and its teaching can radically affect the outcomes of literacy instruction and teachers of literacy need to take some steps to understand these in their own instructional contexts.

Previous research

The 1970s and 1980s saw a number of significant investigations into learners' perceptions of literacy, perhaps best exemplified by the investigations of Downing (e.g. Downing, 1986) into what he termed 'cognitive clarity', by which he meant the understanding that learners need to develop about the functions and features of written language. What emerged from studies like these was a picture of general confusion, among younger pupils at least, about the purposes and mechanisms of literacy. Readers generally were not clear about why they were learning to read and why they were being asked to carry out the activities they were.

*Corresponding author. Institute of Education, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK.
Email: d.j.wray@warwick.ac.uk

We carried out two studies of our own in the early 1990s which added to this picture, one on pupils' perceptions of reading and one on pupils' perceptions of writing.

Pupils' perceptions of reading

Medwell (1991) investigated the perceptions of reading held by primary school pupils and the way these related to what these young readers were trying to do when they read. Medwell worked with a group of 8-year-olds, selected by their teachers as good readers, average readers or poor readers. She first interviewed them about reading, using the three questions used much earlier by Johns and Ellis (1976):

1. What is reading?
2. What do you do when you read?
3. If you knew someone who didn't know how to read, what would you tell them they needed to know?

Responses to these questions were categorized according to the following scheme:

Category 1: Meaningless, circular or vague responses, such as: 'you move your lips', 'it's reading a book', 'you stand up in front of the class'. Responses falling into this category were given by 16% of pupils.

Category 2: Responses focusing on classroom practices, such as: 'it's going on to the next book', 'you have to read out loud to Mrs James'. Responses falling into this category were given by 23% of pupils.

Category 3: Responses involving decoding or word recognition, such as: 'looking at words and splitting them up', 'looking at words and knowing what they say'. Responses falling into this category were given by 25% of pupils.

Category 4: Responses recognizing that reading involves understanding meanings, such as: 'learning things from books', 'working out what the author means'. Responses falling into this category were given by 29% of pupils.

Category 5: Responses involving both decoding/word recognition and understanding, such as: 'it's about interesting things and you have to know lots of words', 'you have to work out the words and what they mean'. Responses falling into this category were given by 6% of pupils.

A trend was observed across the group that the better readers made fewer meaningless responses and a high proportion of Category 3, 4 and 5 responses. The poorer readers only made responses in the first three categories.

Medwell went on to carry out a miscue analysis on each pupil's oral reading. She classified their substitutions as graphophonically, semantically, or both graphophonically and semantically appropriate. For the good readers, 51% of the substitutions

were graphophonically appropriate, 15% semantically appropriate, and 24% both graphophonically and semantically appropriate. For the poor readers 84% of substitutions were graphophonically appropriate, 1% semantically appropriate, and 16% both graphophonically and semantically appropriate.

The implication was that the poorer the readers, the more likely they were to be using only graphophonic cues in reading and the more likely they were to be confused about what reading was and how one did it. Poorer readers appeared to have a very narrow concept of reading and a very limited range of strategies for approaching it. Good readers generally had a much more balanced view of reading and were more meaning-focused in their attempts to read.

Pupils' perceptions of writing

Wray (1993) investigated pupils' perceptions of writing by collecting written comments from 475 children, aged between 7 and 11 years. These children were all asked to respond to the following question:

Some children in the class below yours have asked you what the writing will be like when they come into your class. Write and tell them, and try to give them some useful advice about what they will have to do to do good writing in your class.

The responses were analysed by looking for mentions of particular features of writing. Spelling accounted for 19.9% of these mentions, neatness 17.3%, and punctuation 10.7%. Taken together with other features such as length, tools and layout, generally grouped together as 'secretarial' aspects of writing, these features accounted for 67.8% of the total number of features mentioned.

Other features, which might be grouped together as 'authorial' aspects of writing (words, style, ideas, structure, etc.) accounted for only 29.7% of the total number of features mentioned. These results, taken at face value, showed an overwhelming preoccupation with the secretarial aspects of writing. This seemed like powerful evidence that, somehow or other, these children had gained the impression that what really mattered in the writing they did in their classrooms were the technical aspects.

Theoretical frameworks

The research mentioned so far was set in a context of growing interest in the cognitive processes of metacognition and metalinguistic awareness. The basic principle of this tradition of inquiry is that there is a strong link between awareness of literacy processes ('knowing about') and competence in these processes ('knowing how'). The temptation is to assume that if learners' metalinguistic awareness could be enhanced, this would lead to an increase in their literacy competence. Evidence about the success of this approach is mixed (it was reviewed in Wray, 1994). Yet its very expression almost puts it at odds with currently more dominant ways of thinking

about learning and development. Metalinguistic awareness was always conceived as something learners had; that is, it was a part of their individual psyche which could be added to (or, by implication, subtracted from). Currently such individualistic notions of cognition are out of fashion and a more socially constructed view is generally accepted.

In terms of curriculum, one of the effects of this shift of interest from the individual to the social has been a realization that the experiences provided for learners in classrooms and schools are not the crucial factor in what these learners actually take away from their schooling. Of more significance is the curriculum that learners construct in their heads—a construction that is inherently social in nature. To put this simply, a curriculum cannot just be delivered to learners with predictable effects. These learners in fact construct their own curricula.

As an example of this we might take the case of the teaching activity known internationally as ‘shared reading’, and involving a teacher sharing the reading of a text (often an enlarged version) with a whole class. The rationale for this activity is that the teacher can model for learners how to read and make sense of a text. In the research study we describe later, two 8-year-old pupils had this to say when asked the question, ‘How do you feel about reading together with the whole class?’

Pupil 1 (boy): We don’t read together as a class. Miss just reads to us from the big book.

Pupil 2 (girl): I like reading with the whole class . . . because it helps me when we come to a word I don’t know.

Here we have two pupils who have had exactly the same curriculum delivered to them, sitting together in the same room in front of the same teacher. Yet they have each constructed radically different curricula from this experience. We cannot know exactly why this different construction has taken place, but it might be revealing to know that Pupil 1 was part of a small group of disaffected boys in this class who were constantly being admonished to listen by their teacher. Pupil 2 was one of a group of girls rated by their teacher as ‘good, attentive pupils’. Group identity may well have played a part in the different constructions being made here.

Such illustrations suggest that in trying to understand literacy teaching in classrooms, and thence hopefully to improve it, a crucial step to take is to gain some insight into what the learners are making of the experiences they are offered.

Current approaches to the teaching of literacy, in the United Kingdom and in other countries, might best be described as ‘managerialist’ in orientation. That is, they are largely determined by the demands and requirements placed upon teachers and schools from above, either from national/federal governments or from more local controlling bodies such as states. Participants in the teaching of literacy (schools, teachers, learners) are generally assumed to be more alike than different, with the effect that their individual differences and perceptions are downplayed in policy and pedagogical developments. Although teachers are required to implement teaching approaches, national strategies such as the National Literacy Strategy in the United

Kingdom and the 'No Child Left Behind' act in the USA assume that there will be relatively little flexibility in this implementation.

These national approaches have, naturally, received strong criticism from a variety of sources and their 'one size fits all' model has attracted a significant proportion of this. Yet such critique internationally has generally focused on the point that managerialist approaches tend to undervalue the contribution that skilful, creative teachers can make to effective literacy instruction. In the USA, one critical website makes this point in the following way:

The insistence upon a particular approach to reading or any other learning area is dangerous because it deskills teachers, ignores decades of craft knowledge and places undue reliance upon formulas and templates. (McKenzie, 2003)

A line of critique noticeably missing, however, has been a consideration that teaching approaches for literacy can only work well when they are in consonance with the learners for whom they are designed. Modern theories about pedagogy, as mentioned above, suggest that curriculum cannot be imposed upon learners, but that it is actively constructed by them on a day-to-day basis. That is, learners are continually involved in socially constructing the reality of their classroom experiences. If this is the case, then the perceptions and views of the major participants in learning, the learners themselves, are of crucial importance in understanding the nature of the experienced curriculum in classrooms. Imposed curricula, by definition, cannot take into account these perceptions and views. Yet these perceptions can determine the success or otherwise of initiatives such as national literacy strategies.

Perceptions of the literacy hour

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was established as a national initiative in 1997 with the aim of raising standards of literacy in English primary schools over a 5- to 10-year period. The political impulse to target standards of literacy in such a way arose from research findings which showed that Britain was generally outperformed in international comparisons of literacy standards and that a distinctive feature of British performance was the existence of a long 'tail' of underachievement, which was relatively greater than that of other countries (Beard, 1998, p. 9).

The NLS provided a framework for teaching which set out 'termly teaching objectives within a practical structure of time and class management' (Beard, 1998, p. 5). Primary teachers and pupils were recommended to conform to a prescribed pattern of teaching (the literacy hour). For the first time British teachers were told not only what to teach, but also how to teach it.

There has, naturally, been considerable debate about the NLS, its structure and methods, and the research that underpins it. In his review of this research, Beard (1998) recognized that ultimately the success of the NLS would depend on the knowledge and skills of teachers, the cooperation of parents and pupils and the awareness that schools can make a substantial impact in raising standards. Teachers,

researchers, the media and others have all commented on different aspects of the strategy, but the views of one particular group, the pupils themselves, did not appear to be strongly represented.

The time seemed ripe, therefore, for a rather more detailed inquiry into what pupils thought about the literacy hour. The aim of this research was to explore these perceptions. It involved a fairly large sample (297 pupils), made up of boys and girls of various abilities aged between 7 and 11, and used a mixture of survey and case-study methods to gather evidence.

Data were gathered in the following ways:

- A questionnaire survey of 11 complete classes containing 297 boys and girls of a range of abilities.
- Interviews with three pupils from each class (33 in total). Pupils were selected randomly but stratified according to gender (at least one boy and girl from each class were interviewed), and ability (in each class pupils considered to be above average, average and below average were selected).
- Each of these interviewed pupils (33 in total) was then observed during one literacy hour.

We do not have space here for a full account of the detailed results of this project, but confine ourselves to a review of the key issues that emerged.

Do pupils enjoy the literacy hour?

Research by Smith and Whiteley (2000) found that teachers believe that pupils generally enjoy the literacy hour. Our research confirms that teachers are correct in this view but not in the case of every pupil. Of pupils who completed the questionnaire, 61.8% said that they enjoyed the literacy hour, and 72% of the pupils interviewed responded favourably when asked what they thought of the literacy hour. This leaves a substantial minority of pupils (30–40%) who do not seem to enjoy the literacy hour.

Some parts of the literacy hour appeared to be more popular than others: 82.4% of pupils who completed the questionnaire enjoyed shared reading and writing as a class and 65.1% were happy with the amount of time spent on this activity. However, although pupils may claim to enjoy the shared reading and writing part of the lesson, their behaviour during this part of the lesson may tell a different story. Evidence from the observation exercise shows that only 61% of pupils overall appeared to be interested and enthusiastic during this section of the lesson. Levels of interest and enthusiasm were higher during other parts of the hour.

This leads us to question why a significantly higher percentage of pupils claim to enjoy the shared part of the lesson than actually appeared to be engaged and interested in it. It might be possible to speculate that one of the reasons this part of the lesson is rated as popular is that by its very nature the work is undertaken together, reading as a class or writing as a class often with the teacher acting as scribe.

This inevitably removes the pressure upon the individual pupil to perform and may allow some pupils the opportunity to sit back and allow others to do most of the work, thus appearing to be uninterested.

Do both boys and girls enjoy the literacy hour?

When the evidence from the interview and the questionnaire was analysed in terms of gender, there was little difference between the views expressed by boys and girls. This result is perhaps somewhat surprising in the light of current anxieties about the underachievement of boys in literacy.

Are less able boys more likely to be unenthusiastic and uninterested than less able girls?

Amongst the less able pupils in the project there seemed to be a relationship between the gender of the pupil and the likelihood of them appearing to be enthusiastic and interested. During our observations more below-average girls (50%) than boys (28%) were judged to be enthusiastic and interested. Throughout the lesson, fewer than half (and often as few as one in five) lower-ability boys were judged to be interested and enthusiastic about the literacy hour.

The results of the interviews showed that the majority of pupils said they enjoyed the literacy hour and that ability or gender did not appear to be a determining factor. However, the results of the observation study suggest that many lower-ability pupils and in particular many lower-ability boys did not appear to be interested or enthusiastic about it.

What about the more able?

Hanke (2000) and Hancock and Mansfield (2002) expressed concern that more able pupils would become bored by the repetitive structure of the literacy hour. Of pupils who were interviewed, 28% expressed negative views about the literacy hour. Boredom was mentioned as a reason for these feelings but the pupils who used this word were spread fairly evenly across the ability range.

The observation exercise showed that throughout the literacy hour, more able pupils in general and in particular more able girls were most likely to be on-task, engaged, interested, enthusiastic and participating. This research has not found any evidence to suggest that the more able are bored during the literacy hour.

Participation

It was speculated earlier that some pupils might prefer the shared part of the literacy hour because it allowed them not to participate. Although teachers should be aware that this might happen, in practice it would be easy for lack of participation amongst a small number of pupils to go undetected for some time. The pupils who were interviewed were asked how they felt about reading aloud with the rest of the class

(shared reading), and 72% of girls responded favourably, compared to 50% of boys. They were then asked whether they preferred to talk during shared work or to let others do the talking, and 38% said they preferred to let others do the talking. Interestingly, the majority (73%) of these pupils were girls.

The pupils were then asked if they liked to participate in the plenary or if they preferred to listen, and 22% said given the choice they would prefer just to listen. A further 3% actively disliked participating in this part of the lesson. It appears that between 25% and 40% of pupils in this group would have preferred not to participate in certain shared parts of the literacy hour.

Who is participating?

An analysis of the results of the observation showed that girls of above-average ability were most likely to be participating in all parts of the literacy hour. Pupils considered to be of below-average ability were least likely to participate.

Several researchers have expressed concern over the suitability of the literacy hour for pupils of different abilities. Although this research has not found boredom among more able pupils to be an issue, a significant proportion of pupils appeared not to be participating in some parts of the lesson. Closer inspection shows that these pupils were more likely to be the less able members of the class.

What type of text did pupils prefer to study?

The questionnaire showed that in shared reading, a story was the most popular type of text overall, chosen by 50.1% of all pupils. The choice of text was important; 42.9% of boys and 31.5% of girls agreed that the choice of text affected their level of enjoyment. If they did not like the text they were less likely to enjoy the lesson.

Research (Moss, 1999; Traves, 2000) has frequently suggested that boys prefer non-fiction texts. However, in this research we found that within the literacy hour, stories were the most popular text type amongst boys, chosen by 54.3% of the Culshaw, 1999; boys. Poetry was most popular amongst girls, chosen by 50%, closely followed by stories at 45.9%. Only 12.2% of pupils chose information texts (non-fiction) as their preferred text type. This made non-fiction the least popular text type overall.

What sort of writing do pupils prefer?

As an investigation of a shared text is commonly followed in the literacy hour by a writing activity involving a similar genre, we were interested to find out if this pattern was reflected in pupils' writing choices. The pupils were asked if they had a favourite type of writing. More boys (33%) chose stories as their favourite type of writing than any other genre. More girls chose poetry as their favourite type of writing than any other genre, closely followed by stories. Non-fiction was the least popular type of writing amongst both boys and girls.

Conclusion

The results of our research into pupils' perceptions of the literacy hour suggest that, on a number of issues, teachers may have misconceptions about the effects of this approach on their pupils.

Teachers appear to be fairly confident that their pupils are enjoying the experience of the literacy hour. Our data, however, suggest that this is not true for between 30 and 40% of pupils. Although over 80% of pupils appeared to be enjoying activities like shared reading, the reasons for their enjoyment may not quite be what teachers might suppose. Considerably fewer pupils exhibited enthusiasm during the lessons observed and it could be that the reason some of them said they enjoyed shared reading was simply that it made few demands upon them.

Teachers would probably guess that the groups of pupils who would enjoy their literacy work least would be the less able and the boys, and in this our data support them. Low-ability pupils, in particular boys, did seem to be enjoying their experiences much less than other pupils. Of course, it was mainly for the benefit of such lower-ability pupils that the literacy hour was instituted in the first place. While lack of enjoyment does not necessarily equate with lack of academic progress, taking pupils' hearts along in teaching is usually thought of as an essential ingredient in taking their minds along too.

One of the principal aims of the literacy hour approach, as expressed in the initial documentation, was that literacy teaching should be well-paced and interactive (Department for Education and Employment, 1998), the point being to maximize pupil participation rates in every lesson. Evidence is beginning to emerge which is questioning whether this aim has been achieved (Hardman *et al.*, 2003) and our data seem to confirm this emerging doubt. Significant numbers of our pupils were not participating in an active way in literacy lessons, and did not wish to, and this was particularly the case with below-average learners.

It has become almost commonplace for teachers and others to attribute one of the causes for the perennial underachievement of boys in literacy to the types of texts they are asked to read and write in school. Boys prefer to read and write non-fiction, so the argument goes, and schools tend to privilege fiction, thus alienating young male pupils. Our data do not support this assertion. Only 12% of our pupils chose non-fiction as their preferred text type for reading, and in writing, non-fiction was by far the least popular text type, even amongst boys.

It is our contention that these are important findings which ought to have an influence upon the ways teachers teach literacy. Yet we return to our main point: that such insights cannot be gained unless we all, teachers and researchers, start taking much more account of the views about literacy teaching held by those we teach. Pupils' perceptions matter, and we need to take much more seriously the business of finding out what they are.

Notes on contributors

David Wray taught in primary schools for 10 years and is currently Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Warwick. He has published over 30 books

on aspects of literacy teaching and is best known for his work on developing teaching strategies to help pupils access the curriculum through literacy.

Jane Medwell taught in primary schools before becoming a teacher educator and currently lectures at the University of Warwick. Her research is in the area of literacy teaching and she has carried out studies into the use of electronic books with children and the characteristics of effective teachers of literacy.

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