

Effective Teachers of Literacy

Summary of findings

A research project by the University of Exeter

Sponsored by the Teacher Training Agency

The Effective Teachers of Literacy Project

This study was commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency. The findings are based on close examination of the work of a sample of teachers whose pupils make effective learning gains in literacy (“effective teachers”) and of a sample of teachers who were less effective in literacy teaching (“validation teachers”).

The aims of this research were to:

- identify the key factors in what effective teachers know, understand and do which enables them to put effective teaching of literacy into practice in the primary phase;**
- identify the strategies which would enable those factors to be more widely applied;**
- examine aspects of continuing professional development which contribute to the development of effective teachers of literacy;**
- identify aspects of their initial teacher training and induction which contribute to developing expertise in novice teachers of literacy.**

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The findings

The research found that:

- effective teachers have strong and coherent personal philosophies about the teaching of literacy which guide their selection of teaching materials and approaches. Among these are:
 - i) the importance of making explicit the purpose of teaching literacy and of showing specifically how literacy activities at the whole text, word and sentence levels contribute to meaningful reading and writing;
 - ii) the need to use texts which the teacher and children can either read or write together. This is used, for example, to make the connections between text, sentence and word level knowledge explicit to children;
 - iii) teaching aspects of reading and writing, such as decoding and spelling, in a systematic and highly structured way and in a way which also makes clear to pupils why these aspects are necessary and useful;
 - iv) making use of well developed systems for monitoring children's progress and needs in literacy and using the resulting information to plan future teaching;
- effective teachers have extensive knowledge about literacy, although not necessarily in a form which could be abstracted from the context of teaching it;
- many effective teachers have had considerable experience of in-service activities in literacy, both as learners and, often, having themselves planned and led such activities for their colleagues.

Teachers' subject knowledge in literacy

Both the effective teachers and the validation teachers knew the requirements of the National Curriculum well, could describe what they were doing in terms of these and recognised the different literacy teaching needs of KS1 and KS2 children. The effective teachers, however, placed a great emphasis on children's knowledge of the purposes and functions of reading and writing and of the strategies used to enable them to read and write. 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 had limited success at recognising some types of words in a sentence and some sub-word units out of context. Units such as phonemes, onsets, rimes and morphemes were problematic for them. Even the use of more everyday terminology for these units 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.

When examining and judging samples of children's reading and writing, all the teachers were able to analyse mistakes. But the way the two groups approached the task was different:

- the effective teachers were more diagnostic in the ways in which they approached the task and were better 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.

Teachers' beliefs about literacy

The effective teachers of literacy tended to place a high value upon communication and composition in their approach to 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 children's understanding of what is read and written.

The effective teachers translated their beliefs about purpose and meaning into practice by paying systematic attention to the goals of reading and writing as well as technical processes such as phonic knowledge, spelling, grammatical knowledge and punctuation.

Technical aspects of literacy tended, however, to be approached in distinctive ways by the effective teachers. The effective teachers' belief in coherence led them to pursue 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 fit in with a broader range of skills. They did not necessarily ensure that pupils understood the connections between such skills and the processes of reading and writing.

Teaching practice governed by knowledge and beliefs

Coherence and consistency emerged as being important and distinctive characteristics of the effective teacher group in several senses:

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

The following section highlights aspects of teachers' practice shaped by their knowledge and beliefs.

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 contribute to communication. They tended to make such connections implicit and explicit. For example, when teaching skills such as vocabulary, word attack and recognition and 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.

The effective teachers 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.

The effective teachers of literacy, because of their concern to contextualise their teaching of language features by working together on texts, made explicit connections for their pupils between the text, sentence and word levels of language study.

The classrooms of the effective teachers were distinguished by the heavy emphasis on literacy in the physical environment and in classroom organisation. There were many examples of literacy displayed in these classrooms. These examples were regularly brought to the children's attention and the children were encouraged to use them to support their own literacy.

Pace and timing

All the teachers taught letter sounds but the effective teachers tended to teach within the context of using a text. They also tended to use short, regular teaching sessions, often involving them in modelling to the children how sounds worked. They placed less emphasis on paper exercises.

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. Many concluded their lessons by reviewing, with the whole class, what the children had done during the lesson.

Differentiation

Some effective teachers differentiated the work they asked pupils to do by allotting different tasks on the basis of ability. These teachers also varied the support given to particular groups of children when they were engaged on tasks the whole class would do at some point. By this means they were able to keep their classes working more closely together through a programme of work.

Assessment

The effective teachers had very clear assessment procedures, usually involving a great deal of focused observation and systematic record-keeping. This contributed markedly to their abilities to select appropriate literacy content for their children's needs.

Professional development

The effective teachers of literacy were more likely to have a subject background in English language and related subjects.

Experiences during initial teacher training had been largely forgotten by the experienced teachers but the more recently qualified effective teachers did value the training they had received in teaching literacy. For example, those teaching at KS2 were able to talk explicitly about how language-related degree work or teacher training had helped them with their teaching. Initial training seemed to have had an important impact upon teachers' approaches to and success at teaching literacy, but the explicit links were inevitably short term.

Experience of longer in-service courses and participation in long-term literacy projects had significantly affected teachers' views about literacy teaching.

The most significant feature of these longer-term experiences appeared to be that they had provided the opportunity and impetus for the teachers to develop and clarify their own personal and practical philosophies about literacy teaching.

Shorter courses were also seen as useful in professional development, but largely in terms of meeting a personal need or keeping in touch with recent developments.

Effective teachers were more likely, and possibly more able, to discuss their views about literacy teaching as a philosophy and to make explicit links between their beliefs and their teaching practices.

Taking on the role of English co-ordinator was very significant for the effective teachers. It was a focus for in-service provision of a certain type and also generated substantial commitment to literacy teaching. Simply being the English co-ordinator had significantly helped many of these teachers to improve their teaching of literacy.

Teachers other than English co-ordinators in their school were more likely to be relatively deprived in terms of in-service opportunities in literacy.

Recent developments in literacy teaching

The study began before the National Literacy Strategy was put in place. Its emphasis is upon teachers rather than teaching. Nonetheless all of the study is relevant to the National Literacy Strategy in helping teachers to consider their subject knowledge and the beliefs that govern their practice. Some specific points of connection between the National Literacy Strategy and this study are highlighted below:

- the effective teachers of literacy had an extensive knowledge of the content of literacy, even though this was not generally knowledge which could be abstracted from the context of their teaching action;
- because of this knowledge they were able to see, and help their pupils see, connections between the text, sentence and word levels of language;
- the effective teachers had coherent belief systems about literacy and its teaching and these were generally consistent with the ways they chose to teach;

- these belief systems and the related teaching practices tended to emphasise the importance of children being clear about the purposes of reading and writing. They used this clarity of purpose as a means of embedding the teaching of grammar, phonics etc. into contexts which made sense to the children;
- these teachers taught lessons which were clearly focused on literacy (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 for further development

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 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. The research team felt strongly that all teachers need professional development in this crucial area.

The nature of professional development experience

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 about literacy and its teaching, for example, through doing and using research.

The content of in-service courses

The most effective in-service content seems not to be 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. Teachers in this study confirmed that one of the most successful forms of in-service activity was that which gave them guided opportunities to try out new ideas in the classroom.

There was little evidence that the effective teachers of literacy had an extensive command of a range of linguistic terminology. However, 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 nature and content of initial training

A priority for this must be equipping novice teachers with the knowledge, understanding and skills set out in the ITT National Curriculum for primary English, including the range of pedagogic strategies to enable them to operate successfully in developing children's literacy. As with experienced teachers, developing such strategies involves more than simple practical experience. Novice teachers also need to develop an awareness of why and in what circumstances they might employ particular teaching approaches. They need not only procedural knowledge about literacy teaching (knowing how), but also conditional knowledge (knowing when and in what way). The development of this knowledge demands the opportunity to compare and contrast their experiences with those of others.

The evidence from this project suggests that the experience of being an English co-ordinator makes a significant contribution to teachers' development as literacy teachers. Schools should consider how appropriate elements of this experience can be replicated for other teachers.

Further information

Further information about this research project and a copy of the final report can be obtained from:

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