

## PLUS ÇA CHANGE:

### CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN LITERACY TEACHING

Dr Ros Fisher

#### ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a longitudinal study of the literacy teaching of two teachers who were involved in a large-scale government initiative to change the way literacy is taught. These two teachers were identified at the outset of the study as being very different in ways in which they thought about the teaching of reading and writing. The research follows these two teachers over three years by interview and observation. Although these teachers made substantial changes to the organisation and management of their literacy teaching, their pedagogical approach did not change. It is argued that although programmes and procedures may be mandated on a large scale, individual differences between teachers' may make the implementation of any such programme more variable in its impact than policy makers would like to expect.

**Key words:** Teaching Change Literacy Elementary

#### 1. REFORM OF TEACHING

Attempts to identify and implement effective ways of teaching have long been the concern of researchers and policy makers alike. Recent initiatives in many parts of the English speaking world have sought to increase attainment through carefully designed teaching programmes. These have met with some success, but the literature about the implementation of such programmes identifies the difficulty of implementing and sustaining such change.

In recent years, state and national governments have introduced major programmes to reform literacy teaching e.g. textbook programmes in USA; the Literacy Block in Victoria, Australia (DEET:Vic, 1997, 1998); the National Literacy Strategy in England (DfEE, 1998). These programmes are largely based on the growing body of evidence about what may constitute effective teaching. Studies of both school and teacher effectiveness have given indications of what might be effective practice and show that teachers can make a difference to the rate and extent of children's achievement. Scheerens (1992) in a meta-analysis of the international evidence from school effectiveness research identifies two widely accepted characteristics of school effectiveness:

- Structured teaching, which involves making learning objectives explicit, a well-planned sequence, regular testing and immediate feedback.

- Effective learning time which includes use of whole class teaching as this maximises the time pupils have with the teacher's attention, focus on a particular subject and the importance of challenge and praise.

However, there is a difference between identifying features of effective teaching and implementing a programme based on this model. Willinsky (1990) warns of the danger of imposing a 'pedagogy of proficiency' (p.162). In reality, classrooms and teachers do not always operate proficiently - not because of any deficiency in themselves but because of the nature of the task itself. Woods (1986) discusses the complex nature of pedagogical knowledge. He describes this as the knowledge that informs and constitutes the action of teaching, involving the whole circumstances surrounding the task. It is informed by theory from a variety of areas: philosophy (why it is done), psychology (how children learn), sociology (knowledge of the social factors affecting learning) and linguistics (communication). Cook-Gumperz (1986) stresses, 'Literacy learning takes place in a social environment through intellectual exchanges in which what is to be learned is to some extent a joint construction of teacher and student' (p.8). This view of teaching is much harder to reconcile with a clearly defined programme of content and procedures. The teacher's own model of teaching will influence the way in which she teaches. Teachers who see literacy teaching as essentially the transmission of skills will teach in a very different way from a teacher who views literacy learning as a complex interaction between what the learner already knows and that which is to be learned.

Fullan (1999) in a review of the factors that can contribute to the success of large-scale reform acknowledges the difficulty of implementing and sustaining change '...none of the programs can be made teacher-proof, school-proof, or district-proof' (p.11). Other writers have claimed that the external imposition of change is never likely to be successful. Hutchinson (1989) argues that top down curriculum innovation projects are unlikely to work as they reflect a

technological theory of change [which] will not deliver what it promises because it cannot; teachers and children may be forced to accept it at a superficial level and in so doing will be denied the opportunity of participating positively in constructing worthwhile change. (p.160)

In the 1970s, the Rand Change Agent Study showed that there is no simple one to one relationship between policy and practice (McLaughlin, 1991). Fullan (1982) argues, 'Neglect of the phenomenology of change - that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended - is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms' (p4).

Thus the aim of a state or nation-wide reform of teaching is one that is fraught with difficulties. Whilst a procedure can be laid down and objectives set, there is no guarantee that this will bring about pedagogical change. Studies of teacher development and teaching style suggest that teachers do not readily take on new methods and are slow to change their ways of teaching (e.g. Tharp and Gallimore, 1988; Galton et al., 1999).

## 2. THE NATIONAL LITERACY STRATEGY

In 1998, British government introduced a National Literacy Strategy (NLS). The Strategy provides a framework of pre-specified objectives for each semester's teaching in text, sentence and word level work which is delivered via a structured hour long session: the literacy hour. This involves shared reading and writing with the whole class (text level: 15 minutes); structured grammar and phonic work with the whole class (sentence or word level: 15 minutes); 20 minutes during which one or two groups work on guided reading or writing with the teacher and the rest of the class work independently; and a ten minute plenary with the whole class. This matches well with the summary of effective teaching (Scheerens *ibid.*), in contrast to much of the previous practice in British primary schools where the teaching of literacy has been largely individualised. It was heralded with the following ambitious statement:

There has never before been a major national initiative to enable all primary teachers to learn the most effective methods of teaching literacy and how to apply them. .... It will be the most ambitious attempt ever in this country to change for the better teaching approaches across the entire education service. (DfEE, 1997, paras. 26/27)

In line with the theory of large-scale reform (Leithwood et al, 1999), the implementation was supported by a massive initiative to support schools. Each school was given a box of video training materials and supporting resources. Headteachers and key literacy teachers were trained to deliver the training package in their schools. However, there was criticism at the time and since that the training addressed surface behaviours and did not consider underlying pedagogy. Thring (1999) argued that the NLS adopted the model of teacher as technician. More recently, Alexander (2004) argues that the NLS (now part of the Primary Strategy) is lacking in an articulated model of pedagogy,

On this basis, the Primary Strategy is found to be ambiguous and possibly dishonest, stylistically demeaning, conceptually weak, evidentially inadequate and culpably ignorant of recent educational history. (p7)

Early evidence of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy suggested considerable change in the organisation and management of the teaching of literacy in primary school classrooms (Ofsted, 1999, 2000; Earl et al., 2000, 2001, 2003). 'The NLS continues to have a major impact on the teaching of English in primary school .... The teaching of reading in primary schools has undergone a transformation (Ofsted, 2000: 5). Evidence from national tests indicates some significant gains in attainment, particularly in reading. However, as with previous innovations, implementation varies across the range of schools and teachers (Ofsted, 2000; Fisher et al, 2000).

The team from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) under Michael Fullan who were charged by the UK government with the external evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NLNS), after the first year of monitoring, agree that modest but significant gains had been made in literacy and numeracy but argue that it would be naïve to claim these were all due to the NLNS (Earl et al., 2000). They cite other factors such as increased motivation and effort to explain short-term gains. 'Continued achievement gains will depend on teachers learning new  
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skills - a slow incremental process' (p.7). They claim, 'NLS and NNS are having an impressive degree of success, especially given the magnitude of the change envisaged' (p77). However, they also question the depth and sustainability of the reform. They argue, 'We believe, however, that a good part of the initial gains in achievement scores may be a function of changes in teaching practice that are effective and relatively easy to implement, although they may not get at the deeper understandings about teaching and learning' (p81).

This paper provides evidence of how these changes were enacted in two classrooms. It chronicles the views and teaching of two teachers over the first three years of the NLS. Both reported that their teaching had changed significantly through the introduction of whole class teaching with clearly identified learning objectives. However, the two teachers were chosen as two with contrasting stances in relation to pedagogy. Observation of their teaching showed that, whereas they made significant changes to the organisation and content of their teaching, the changes they reported were not as evident as might have been expected. For example, although they both claimed their teaching to be more focused and explicit, clarity of focus was not always evidenced by the classroom observations. Nevertheless, the pedagogical stance adopted by these teachers in lessons at the start of the NLS appeared largely unchanged three years on: for example, in the ways they interacted with pupils about the text. This may illustrate continuity in those 'deeper understandings about teaching and learning' referred to by Earl et al (2000).

### **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **3.1 *Participants and context***

The participants and data for this study were drawn from two earlier investigations into primary (4-11 years) literacy teaching in the first years after the launch of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in England (DfEE, 1998). The first study was an externally funded project (ESRC R 000 22 2608) that took place in the first year of the implementation. This project followed 20 primary (4-11) classrooms in small rural schools through the first year of the NLS in order to study the way teachers implemented the designated literacy hour and how children responded to the changes (see Fisher and Lewis, 2000). The second study, funded by the University of Plymouth, followed those teachers who had stayed in post over the next two years and wished to continue in the project to study how their teaching changed (see Fisher, 2002).

Using data from these two studies, this research set out to answer the question: What changes or continuities can be identified in the teaching and views on teaching of two experienced teachers with very different stances to the teaching of literacy during a period of intensive reform? Observation and interview data from the previous studies were used to identify themes that seemed important to teachers. Evidence of what they said and how this related to their observed practice was used to explore the nature of changes to their teaching of literacy. This study is based on a social constructivist view of teacher development and the belief that teaching is not simply determined by external

imposition but that individuals are continually constructing their practice from existing beliefs and ongoing experience of their own and others' practice.

For the purposes of this study, two teachers from the remaining group of seven were selected from their original responses to the Teachers' Beliefs about Literacy Questionnaire (Westwood et al, 1997). The questionnaire rates teachers' beliefs about teaching literacy on a scale from child centred to structured teaching. Teachers respond to 24 questions about teaching reading and teaching spelling and are then asked to rate themselves on a scale from 1-7. The original twenty teachers' scores ranged from 35 to 94 (within a possible range of 24-120). The teacher identified in 1998 by the questionnaire as being most 'structured' scored 35 (Teacher 1) and the teacher ranked most 'child-centred' in her beliefs about teaching scored 94 (Teacher 2). These two teachers, referred to here as Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 had remained in post in the same school from 1998 – 2001. They had 14 and 11 years experience respectively and had taught in the same school for several years. Both schools were in village communities and both teachers taught mixed age classes in the range from 4-7 years, although the exact composition of the class changed each year.

### **3.2 Data**

The data that were used, in addition to the questionnaire, included:

- Transcripts of interviews with the 20 teachers in July and September 1998, before the full implementation of the NLS. The interview was based on a loose structure that sought to explore the current practice of the teachers and to ascertain their views about the impending change to their teaching. Each interview lasted at least one hour.
- Transcripts of interviews with the same teachers in July 1999 which sought their views on the implementation of the NLS and how it had affected their practice. These interviews lasted at least one hour.
- Questionnaires and transcripts of interviews with the 12 remaining teachers at the end of the school year 2000. The questionnaire asked about content, implementation and impact of the NLS. A half hour interview picked up on points raised by the teachers.
- Questionnaires and transcripts of interviews with the seven remaining teachers at the end of the 2001 school year. These were similarly designed to explore where teachers felt their teaching had changed and where this had resulted in improvements or difficulties.
- Observation schedules and field notes from the observations of literacy teaching during the three years. In the first year, eight observations of the 'literacy hour' were made on a monthly basis and one hour long observation was made towards the end of each of the subsequent years. The observation schedule contained contextual information on page one. The next four pages referred to the four sections of the literacy hour. A description of what the teacher was doing and saying at seven points during the hour was

entered on the schedule. The field notes were written up after the visit and contained a more subjective and impressionistic commentary on the teaching.

- Research notes from both projects.

The same research assistant undertook all observations and all but the first interview with Teacher 1. This interview was conducted by the author herself as it took place before the appointment of the research assistant to the project.

## **4. DATA ANALYSIS**

### ***4.1 Identification and exploration of key issues***

Following the selection of the two teachers, the questionnaires and transcripts of the interviews with the two teachers conducted at the end of the third year of the NLS were examined. Teachers had been asked how they thought their teaching had changed and what differences or improvements had resulted. Follow up questions were used to give teachers opportunities to develop or change their ideas. Thus the teachers themselves identified topics of importance to them. These topics were not the same for each teacher but reflected whatever seemed to be of importance to each teacher at the time of the interview. The transcript of each teacher's original interview in 1998 was then examined to identify how the same topics were addressed on the earlier occasion. The interview data for 1999 and 2000 were also used to locate allusions to these themes on the other occasions. Although what is said in one interview on one occasion may not fully cover major areas of thinking, tracing such themes across several interviews over a period of time could be said to give an, at least, partial picture of what counts as important to each teacher.

### ***4.2 Analysis of observation schedules and field notes***

The field notes and observation schedules for the first two observed literacy hours in late 1998 and for the lessons observed at the end of 1999, 2000 and 2001 were closely scrutinised. Evidence was sought within the data for how those aspects of literacy teaching that teachers had identified in interview were actualised in the classroom.

## **5. WHAT THE TEACHERS SAID**

Both teachers, although initially anxious about the introduction of the NLS, were also positive about some of the ideas and gained confidence over the years. Each year they talked positively and enthusiastically about how they felt their teaching had improved as well as sharing their concerns. Both teachers were observed to use each element of the literacy hour in each of the 8 lessons in the year 1998-9. In 2001, Teacher 1 reported that she used the literacy hour on 4 days in the week and did extended writing on the fifth. Teacher 2 reported she used it 5 days a week. It must also be noted that throughout the lesson observations and field notes the researcher commented children in both teachers' classes were engaged in the work and appeared to enjoy the lessons. Children in both classes made progress in reading and writing.

## **5.1 Interview 2001**

The questionnaire in 2001 asked teachers how they thought their teaching had changed since the introduction of the NLS and what, if any, concerns they had about their teaching now. Thus topics were identified by the teachers themselves in response to questioning. Here representative extracts from the data are used to illustrate the points.

### **5.1.1 Teacher 1**

Teacher 1 had two main areas that she spoke about in the interview in 2001:

- The way she felt her teaching had become more and more focused.
- Her continued difficulties with planning and organisation, that ‘there is not enough time in the day’ and the resulting difficulty of matching work to the children’s perceived needs.

#### Increased focus of teaching

When asked how she felt the NLS influenced her teaching after three years, Teacher 1 spoke of how she was more concerned now to really focus on the objectives of the lesson.

I'm trying to ensure that there is even a tighter match now by really focusing, making sure I focus specifically on the objectives of the literacy strategy and that guides very much my planning. ....

I think I always did try to make sure that I was covering the objectives but I think my planning now, I try to make the objectives much more specific, much more obvious to myself and the children. I try to tell them at the beginning of a lesson what the objectives are. (Interview 2/7/01)

#### Continued concern about organisation and matching the needs of her class

When asked if she found any problems with her literacy teaching she said,

I think it's still the issue of time, I've got a very large class this term and I've certainly found it much more challenging this term to get as much group work as I'd like..... but I think it's mainly because of the number of groups and because of the particular range of readers that I've got in the class at the moment (Interview 2/7/01)

### **5.1.2 Teacher 2**

Three areas were identified by Teacher 2 in 2001:

- The increase in her teaching of phonics – a major thrust from national policy.
- The difficulty of planning while remaining sensitive to the needs of her class.
- Her enthusiasm for the use of big books to contextualise the work.

### Increase in teaching of phonics

When asked how she felt her teaching had changed, Teacher 2 talked about how the introduction of a new phonics programme introduced in the previous year to support the NLS (DfEE, 2000) had affected her teaching. She explained,

The phonic book – I use that a lot - ..... I think I wouldn't say that I wasn't doing it before. It was just helpful, I think the stages are helpful. ....but I am using those as you would've noticed this morning, those hearing sounds and then separating the sounds in the rhymes and then go on to after that when you can separate the sounds, match them to initial letters. I have always done that, but actually using the strategy and the stages as it is, I found very useful.

(Interview 12/9/01)

### Continuing difficulty with planning while remaining sensitive to the needs of the class

She also spoke about her concern about planning. The interviewer commented that her weekly planning sheet was only filled in up to and including that day. Teacher 2 replied,

I go on what's happened today, for tomorrow. I've got my objectives and the different activities. I might think 'well they didn't get [it].' I might look at what year 2 have written after school, because I don't know how they've got on with that, because they've worked on their own, so how do I know what they can do tomorrow? Maybe I will sit with them and we will talk about what they've written and we'll do some more writing or maybe I'll think of something else tonight. I do find it difficult to plan a whole week in advance, I know I've seen other people's plans and I think 'how do they do that?' I'm a bit of an impulsive planner and teacher I think, some people are good at planning ahead aren't they?

(Interview 12/9/01)

She also commented, when still talking about her phonics teaching, that she felt the NLS had become 'more fluid, hasn't it, more flexible' and that she could now 'mix and match for all my different groups'.

### Continued enthusiasm for the use of big books to contextualise the work

Teacher 2 also spoke of her enthusiasm for the shared reading and writing. In particular she found that using big books helped contextualise the work although she felt frustrated at a lack of resources. 'I still feel that the text level work is really superb and I really like that, I just wish I'd got loads more big books, I wish I'd got loads more resources. .... If you want to look for instance now I'm doing stories within familiar settings, so [I'm using the book] 'Getting Lost'. (Interview 12/9/01)



## 5.2 *Previous interviews and TBALQ*

### 5.2.1 *Teacher 1*

In 1998, Teacher 1 was working in a successful school with a strong headteacher. The research notes comment:

‘An anxious teacher working in a good system - perhaps overrelies on structure of the existing system to support her’. (Research notes October 1998)

#### Increased focus of teaching

In her response to the questions about direct teaching in the TBALQ, Teacher 1 showed that she valued direct teaching of specific aspects of literacy. This is unsurprising since this teacher has been selected for this study as the teacher whose answers suggested she was the most structured in her beliefs about teaching. For example, she marked ‘strongly disagree’ in response to the statements ‘Direct teaching of phonics is not necessary as children can learn all they need to know about the alphabetic code by being helped with their daily reading and writing activities and by observing others’ and ‘Devoting specific time to word study in isolation is undesirable since this practice decontextualises a component skill of language’.

This concern for the teaching of specific skills was also revealed in the description of her current practice. In 1998 she described how the practice within the school was changing in this direction. ‘I think in the last few years, certainly [we’re] beginning to structure our phonic teaching, structuring spelling more carefully. We didn’t do a lot of spelling work with year one children certainly, and with no regular testing, but we do now.’ (Interview July 1998)

However, she also described less didactic practice.

Obviously we do various forms of writing narrative and letters, things like that. When we’re working with the children we say, "Right this is your best go and we want you to write independently." Other times we’ll be discussing work from a story or from a video and I will write up some key words and they will then go off and do some writing using those.

(Interview July 1998)

At the end of the first year of the NLS the two main areas of change that she identified were: more direct teaching, greater awareness of objectives with more focused teaching style and challenging children in more focused way with greater clarity of direction. She reported that she did more whole class teaching and more structured phonic work. Similar themes are identified in the interview summary for 2000. She had said she felt the NLS had made her more structured in her teaching of reading and made her more aware of what to teach and what to look for in assessment.

### Concern about organisation and matching the needs of her class

In the interview in 1998, Teacher 1 said she was mainly positive about the NLS but also a little apprehensive. She was concerned about the management of the teaching of the literacy hour. 'I don't think it will be too big a change, because we have talked briefly about how we are going to introduce it. ... I think the pace will be [quicker]. We do give quite a lot of time really to language work already and it's really just reorganising it I think. I hope there'll be the time.' In particular she worried about the different abilities in the class. 'I worry a bit about whether the weakest children will cope. I have to be honest about that.' Commenting on a training day she had attended, she said,

I was concerned for both the brightest and the weakest because I got the impression that you aim for the middle and, particularly bearing in mind, I've got some particularly bright children, I'm a bit worried that if you have to stick so rigidly to the file [NLS Framework for Teaching, DfEE, 1998] that some will not be stretched. (Interview July 1998)

In July 1999, she was surprised how well it was going although she was finding it difficult to fit in all the components of the hour. She felt the pace of her teaching had quickened and she was aware of a wider range of objectives but was concerned about some lack of depth. She was also concerned about the grouping of children with different abilities for group work and with how to stretch the most able and help the least able. One of her aims for the following year was to plan her questioning more carefully to provide better differentiation. In July, 2000 she felt that things had improved and that, whereas in the first year, she had found the pace hard, this year as children have come to her with more knowledge she has felt there was not such a sense of drilling the work into them. Thus the data show Teacher 1 to be aware of the increased structure and focus in her teaching over the three years. Although she found the system worked well, she was concerned about fitting everything in.

### **5.2.2 Teacher 2**

Teacher 2 worked in a small village school with an easy, relaxed atmosphere. The research notes comment: 'An enthusiastic teacher. Mainly 'progressive' but coming round to a more structured approach following her experience of the literacy hour.' (Research notes October 1998)

### Increase in the teaching of phonics

The questions in the TBALQ focused largely on the teaching of phonics. In line with the results of the questionnaire, which identified her as the most child-centred of the teachers, Teacher 2 responded unfavourably to ideas about the direct teaching of phonics. For example, she responded 'strongly agree' to Devoting specific time to word study in isolation is undesirable since this practice decontextualises a component skill of language.

In June 1998, when discussing how she taught before the introduction of the NLS she said,

'So they would do initial sounds, and onset and rime. We use plastic letters... encourage them to write emergently.' And later in the same interview, 'I think, to be absolutely honest with you, I don't think I

did as much phonic teaching later on as I did earlier on. With the initial sounds and the blends, but not as much of the "Magic E" ...' (Interview, June 1998).

In the interview in 1999, phonics was not mentioned at all. In 2000, she felt her approach to phonics teaching had changed, the interview summary explains,

In particular, with phonics, before [the NLS she] liked to do whole before the parts. Now feels she is teaching skills as opposed to knowledge - how to apply the knowledge. But feels this could have made younger children more inhibited in their emergent writing as they are aware of how to build up spellings. Feels she may need to redress the balance. (Research notes, July 2000)

#### The difficulty of planning while remaining sensitive to the needs of her class

Planning according to given objectives depending on the age of the children and the time of year had caused initial anxiety for Teacher 2. In the first interview she had described her planning as,

I hadn't done the forward planning in the way that I was expected to do. It's been retrospective planning, "What have I done, and what have I got...?" I think I like doing it in that way because you get a book and the book itself. If it's a good text ... you get so much out of it that it just comes to you and you haven't chosen that book because you want to do this, that or the other. I just don't work that way, I get inspired by what's happening in there. (Interview June, 1998)

She found it difficult to imagine how she could follow pre-designated objectives. She said, '[Before] I could see which initial sounds they didn't know and for a certain group that would be the input.' Describing her previous practice she said, 'I think I used to spend much longer doing one thing, say story writing and we would all start off and all write a story. It might take all morning because they get into it and ...' However, she noted her classroom organisation was already changing in response to the impending strategy.

I think it makes me concentrate on.... decide which group I am going to be teaching. I don't sort of flit around. I don't set work for groups and then flit around from group to group. They have to learn that they have to work on their own and that's one of the things that has definitely changed.

(Interview June 1998)

In the interview in 1999, she reiterated that she felt the NLS was making her teaching more focused, with less 'flitting around'. But she said she found the planning 'horrendous'. In 2000, she reported a continuation of that change in that her planning had changed from 'sort of knowing intuitively what I was going to do rather than thinking about it in more detail.'

### Her enthusiasm for the use of big books to contextualise the work

Her love of books and enjoyment of sharing books with her class had been a feature of Teacher 2's work. One of her initial concerns about the NLS was that she would no longer be able to plan all her work from a particular storybook. But she welcomed the introduction (for her) to the use of big books in shared reading: 'But what I really like about it is; using a good book, a good piece of text, because it is a real book, then it's worth while and the learning that comes from it is from that text, it's not out of context.'

Her concern about decontextualised work is a recurring theme. However, even in June 1998 she commented favourably on the NLS, 'I thought it would be more decontextualised than it is.' She describes a literacy activity from the previous week to exemplify what she meant,

This week I decided I'd been picking blackberries, and we'd been talking about instructions; so I wrote "How to make a blackberry and apple pie", and I wrote the recipe and they helped me with it, so I did that writing and then they said; "Do we have to? Do we have to write a recipe?" and I said; "No, you can write what ever you like, that's just what I've chosen to write...", but I was just introducing different forms of writing in that [but] they have a purpose for doing their writing.

(Interview June 1998)

In 1999, she commented again on her pleasure at the work around whole texts. The research notes say, [She] finds children enjoy the texts; feels their independence has improved; finds children's enthusiasm for texts has improved; good for teaching skills in context. Thus for teacher 2 the data show her pleased with the increase in phonics teaching and that she could continue to use texts to contextualise her work. However, she was concerned about planning despite attempts to become more structured.

### **5.3 *Observation of teaching***

It can be seen clearly from the interview data that these teachers felt that their teaching had changed considerably over the preceding three years and that this change was mostly for the better. As has been discussed earlier, critics of large scale, centrally imposed change argue that, while changes in organisation and content can be implemented, deeper rooted change is more problematic. For both these teachers, early observations confirmed the findings of TBALQ that one was child centred in her approach whereas the other was more didactic. The TBALQ was not administered again in 2001 because, at the time, it was not recognised that this would be the last visit to these teachers.

### 5.3.1 *Teacher 1*

The two elements selected by Teacher 1 are both key features of the NLS: a sharp focus for teaching, and a brisk pace. Observations show continuity in the way this focus was mediated and how the timing and structure of the hour influenced her teaching.

#### Focus of teaching

Teacher 1's focus on specific objectives was evident in the first observation in 1998. The lesson focused on the re-reading and recall of a story introduced the day before and the spelling of words using magnetic letters. The researcher's field notes comment, 'It seemed to me much of the enjoyment and understanding of the story was sacrificed to the decoding work.' (Field notes 3.11.98).

The second observed lesson followed a similar format. The researcher commented that children enjoyed the story and answered questions about it. However, her comment on the sentence level section again reveals a didactic approach.

Teacher reminds children that they have talked previously about sentences and lines. Then, referring to enlarged text, she asks children where a sentence begins and ends and how they know this. . . . . She talks the entire time – a running commentary on what a sentence is and how sometimes it is shorter than a line and sometimes longer. Sometimes I think the teacher input is overkill.

(Field notes 1.12.98)

It is interesting to note that knowledge of sentences was not included in the objectives for that day or that week.

In 2001, the lesson started with a spelling focus on ar/ir words and continued with children writing their own poems based on a model given by the teacher. The tape recording of this lesson shows the focus to be almost entirely on the making of rhymes. There was little or no mention of the purpose of the poem nor of the effect of the language on meaning.

#### Organisation and matching the needs of her class

A major theme of the observations of Teacher 1 was that of time. In the early days of the first project, a sub-group of teachers from our sample was identified as 'clock watchers'. These teachers seemed overly concerned about keeping to the timing of the sections of the literacy hour.

In the first observed lesson in 1998, the researcher commented, 'The teacher seemed very much motivated by the timing of the literacy hour.' And 'I felt the teacher's attention was on what she was supposed to do next rather than the children' (Field notes 3.11.98). Of the next observed lesson the researcher wrote, 'Teacher refers to the Literacy Schedule as she has several times – perhaps to remind herself to move on' (Field notes 1.12.98).

In 2001 again the field notes refer to the teacher being flustered. The tape recording of the lesson shows her continually reminding children of the time and how much they have written. In the plenary at the end, children are praised for the amount of writing produced rather than the meaning or impact of the piece.

It appears that this teacher's teaching has indeed become more focused with the work being led by clearly defined objectives. However, an underlying didactic approach and a concern for the structure and time management of the lesson has not changed.

## 5.2. 5.3.2 Teacher 2

Two of the elements mentioned by Teacher 2 related to the content of the lessons and the resources: increase in phonics teaching and use of big books. Both of these are also key elements of the NLS. It is in how she went about her planning and how she questioned children about the texts they were reading that the continuity can be seen.

### Increase in the teaching of phonics

In the first two observed lessons in 1998, teacher 2 did teach phonics and in each case the teaching was linked to the text used in the shared reading part of the lesson. In 2001, she was using the newly introduced PIPs programme (DfEE, 2000) in which children and teacher play phonic games. In addition to the games, she linked the sounds covered in the games to appropriate words in the shared text.

### Difficulty of planning while remaining sensitive to the needs of her class

Teacher 2's difficulty with reconciling her planning with the NLS was evident from the first observation when there was no lesson plan available for the lesson. On the second visit a plan was in place for that day and the previous day. Field notes record that in the second visit she commented that one group would need more help and she would sit with them on the next day. Within the Literacy Strategy, which group would have the attention of the teacher would have already been planned ahead of time. Of course, it was not expected that teachers would follow this rigidly in cases where children needed more help. However, some teachers did seem to feel they had to stick closely to a predetermined format. In 2001, the weekly plan still only gave lessons up to the day of the visit.

Teacher 2's concern for the needs of her class was evident to the researcher as can be seen from the observation and field notes. For example, she checks to make sure children can see the text and allows children to make 'spontaneous comments as they respond to the story.' However, this is not without a focus on the purpose of the activity:

They spend a good amount of time giving suggestions and considering the possibilities..... [T]eacher asks 'how do you know the witch isn't nasty? Which words tell you?' The children begin to make up answers but teacher pulls them back to the text – they find 'nice', 'cuddly', 'friendly', 'comfy' and talk about each one. Teacher elaborates. Children want to read on in the story but teacher firm!

(Field notes 8.12.98)

Field notes from 2001 reveal the same approach to the children and what is being taught. The researcher wrote, [Teacher 2] still displays a warm sensitive and responsive approach to her children. [She] has some objectives in her plans .... She still plans as she goes along. However, she does not make [objectives] explicit ... she brings them in as part of work. As before there is no brisk, businesslike pace but everything happens on time, purposefully. It seems to reflect a lot of thoughtful planning. (Field notes 2001)

#### Enthusiasm for the use of big books to contextualise the work

This teacher's sensitivity to children's sense of understanding and enjoyment of the text can be seen in her use of open questions and response to these, 'Encourages children to think what will happen next and asks children for ideas – considers each one'. (Lesson observation 8.12.98).

In 2001, the same is evident, '[She] still seems enthusiastic about big books, working hard to bring meanings out of the text pictures. Her voice is expressive and her interactions with the children take on the tone of invitations to imagination, to discovery of new words and to fun.' (Field notes, September 2001)

## **6. DISCUSSION**

It is evident from the field notes made by the research assistant, that she favours the style of one teacher over the other. The purpose of this re-examination of the data is not to evaluate the teaching styles of the two teachers. It has already been noted that the two teachers were successful, in terms of both children's achievement in the first year of the project and children's engagement in the lessons throughout. No data is available to judge attainment year on year as the numbers entered for national tests in mixed-age classes are small and vary from year to year. The fact that the same research assistant made all the observations provides a valid basis for comparison, despite the subjectivity of the observer. Although a halo effect is possible, there were twenty teachers in the project and a considerable length of time passed between visits in years two and three. During this time the observer visited other schools and was involved in other projects. In addition, the project director conducted the analysis of the observation schedules and had access to the tape recordings of lessons in 2000 and 2001.

In both schools the changes had begun to take place before the NLS but the implementation in September 1998, marked a concerted shift in organisation and content. The data shows that both teachers made considerable changes to how they planned and organised their teaching and to the content of that teaching. Teacher 1 moved from an integrated day (in which groups of children work on different curriculum areas while the teacher moves around interacting with individuals) to a dedicated literacy lesson with a predefined structure. Teacher 2 moved from a practice in which how long children spent on activities was decided by how those activities were going and what she described as 'flitting around' to greater sharpness and focus. Both teachers increasingly planned their work from a predetermined list of objectives. In addition, both teachers reported that the content of their teaching had changed.

Although not reported here, both mentioned the increase in the range of aspects of literacy taught and the wider range of texts used. Phonic teaching, in particular had increased.

Despite these significant changes, each teacher remained largely consistent in her pedagogical stance. Both teachers expressed their concern for the needs of their class within the new way of teaching. However, each teacher had a different way of dealing with this. Teacher 1 strove to organise her groups more carefully and define her objectives more specifically, although observations show she did not always make these explicit. On the other hand, teacher 2 welcomed a perceived increase in the flexibility of the system. She wove the objectives into her teaching and adapted her teaching to match her perception of children's needs.

The overwhelming evidence from large scale evaluations of the NLS point to significant changes being made in the structure, content and organisation of literacy lessons in England (Ofsted, 1999, 2000, 2003; Earl et al, 2000, 2001, 2003). However, often from the same sources, there are questions raised about the variability of implementation (Ofsted, 1999, 2000, 2003; Earl et al, 2000, 2001, 2003). This suggestion of variability is supported by analysis of the national assessments for English for the last five years (DfES, 2004) which shows that, after initial increases in achievement in reading, progress has levelled out and writing scores remain lower than expected.

Willinsky (1990) proposes that initiatives such as the NLS adopt a pedagogy of proficiency but that teaching is not like that. It is not enough to learn 'the most effective methods and apply them' (DfEE, 1997, paras 26/6). Argyris and Schön (1974) show how in understanding professional practice it is essential to distinguish the espoused theory, which a teacher may say s/he believes in, from the 'theory-in-use' which actually, regardless of what is said, influences a teacher's practice. These teachers appeared to have 'espoused' the theories of the NLS requiring clear structure and focused teaching, but, when it came to what they did in the classroom, their action seemed more related to this 'theory in use' which affected how they interacted with children when teaching.

The OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) group under Michael Fullan poses the following question at the end of their second evaluation report (Earl et al., 2001, p79), How deep are the changes in teaching that occur as a result of the reform? The findings of this small study, link with the findings of Galton et al (1999) when they revisited classrooms, twenty years on from previous research, after ten years of the National Curriculum. They found that many ways of working had changed very little in the intervening years. They argue that the National Curriculum was a 'technical innovation' that was imposed on teachers and that teachers' 'first response in such situations is to 'bolt on' each new development to existing and familiar practice' (p.53).

It is impossible to generalise from so few teachers, but the evidence from this study raises some important questions about how and to what extent teachers change in response to large-scale initiatives and where practice may be more deep-rooted. There can be no doubt that the teaching of literacy in England has undergone a radical overhaul in that

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most classrooms (including both teachers discussed here) now have an hour devoted to literacy each day and teachers plan lessons using the Framework of Objectives (DfEE, 1998). Certain practices are now well established, such as shared whole class reading with enlarged texts and the use of a plenary. However, the teacher is central to the success of any programme of reform. It is relatively easy to change content, resources and management in lessons. More difficult to influence is the way in which these are mediated. Fundamental beliefs about the nature of the subject and the nature of the learner are at play here. Teaching involves complex interplay between what the teacher does and what s/he thinks. Whilst much can be changed by external imposition, more deep-rooted change may involve a more individual and reflective engagement with the issues than an externally imposed programme allows. The National Literacy Strategy in England has resulted in impressive increases in levels of attainment in the first few years. However, this appears to be levelling out.

In addition, concerns are being expressed about how the literacy hour is being taught in some classes. Some researchers criticise the delivery of whole class teaching which is a key feature of the NLS (English et al, 2000; Mroz et al; and Burns and Myhill, 2004). They point to poor use of classroom discussion and low challenge in questioning. Similarly, other commentators criticise the strategy for being under-researched (Wyse, 2003); potentially damaging to creativity (Pulman, 2003); or too literally interpreted resulting in an anxious literalism (Frater, 2000) – such as, for example, Teacher 1's concern with the timing of the lesson. These critics lay the blame at the door of the NLS. However, the evidence presented here illustrates how a teaching method can be delivered in different ways by different people. Teacher 1, while altering the organisation of her literacy lesson by including whole class and group teaching, rarely referred to the meaning of the texts the children read or wrote. Similarly, Teacher 2 continued to struggle with planning work more than a day ahead preferring to plan the next day's work after seeing how children had coped with the lesson of the day. From the example of these two teachers, it can be seen that whereas both felt they had made changes, their underlying concerns remained relatively constant and observation of their teaching indicated an underlying continuity in how they mediated the learning within the new framework. It may be that those areas of teaching that are hardest to influence are also those that are crucial to how children learn. In particular, how the learning object is mediated between teacher and child is crucial in what understandings result from that interaction. If the focus is on meaning as with teacher 2, the outcome is likely to be different from where the focus is on completion of the task or uncontextualised acquisition of skills as with Teacher 1.

Changing teaching is difficult. Leithwood et al. (1999) review evidence for what works in successfully implementing and sustaining reform. They recognise the difficulties of attaining a 'reasonably uniform, widespread understanding of a single reform initiative' (p.15). Whereas the government's intention was to 'change for the better teaching approaches across the entire education service' (DfEE, 1997, paras. 26/27), it is clear that at the individual level change in teaching covers more than programmes and procedures. As Reynolds (1998) argues, 'It may be that the problems with literacy teaching .....may not necessarily only be to do with the validity of the methods being utilised in schools, but more the reliability of their implementation'. (p.169).

This analysis of the thoughts and practice of two teachers during a period of large-scale reform shows that further work needs to be done to investigate how teaching reform becomes embedded. It is important for reformers to recognise the complex, interactional context of the classroom and to acknowledge the importance of the individual teacher's pedagogical stance in how any reform will be implemented. Successful teaching of literacy (and, no doubt, any other subject) relies as much on the individual capacity of the teacher as any programme of content or techniques.

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