

# **Embedding the literacy strategy: snapshots of change**

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## **Abstract**

This paper considers the government's initiative to change the teaching of literacy in primary schools in England. It draws on evidence from a one-year ESRC funded project that observed teaching in the first year of the NLS and a two-year follow-up study that revisited and re-interviewed several of the teachers from the original study. It proposes that, although substantial changes have been made to the organisation and procedures of literacy teaching, deeper pedagogical change is less obvious in some classrooms. It further argues that for teachers to have the freedom to develop their pedagogy the climate of coercion and outcome-led education must change.

## **Introduction**

The concept of a nation-wide reform of teaching is one that is attractive to policy makers but one that is difficult to achieve. 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 teaching methods and are slow to change their ways of teaching (e.g. Desforges and Cockburn, 1987; Tharp and Gallimore, 1988; Galton et al., 1999). This paper considers evidence from a longitudinal study of primary teachers and examines how some teachers have changed in their views about teaching and how they teach literacy.

## **Reform of teaching**

In 1997 the new Labour government's Literacy Task Force made 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)

Many people were sceptical and argued that the external imposition of change is fraught with difficulties. Fullan (1999) in a review of the factors that can contribute to the success of large-scale reform acknowledged the difficulty of implementing and sustaining change across a large number of schools, '*...none of the programs can be made teacher-proof, school-proof, or district-proof.*' (p.11) He concludes, however, that positive effects are possible particularly where the systems and the structures are well supported through resources, staff development and commitment on the part of educators and the public at large. Nevertheless 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)*

#### *Effective teaching of literacy*

The NLS notion of changing 'for the better teaching approaches across the entire education service' (DfEE, 1997) came partly in response to studies of school and teacher effectiveness. These have shown that good 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 teachers' attention, focus on a particular subject and the importance of challenge and praise.

These findings have been incorporated into the teaching approaches required by the National Literacy Strategy.

However, these elements can be represented by procedures (what teachers do) and by the way teachers go about enacting these procedures (how they do it). The former may be easier to change than the latter. Indeed, some facets of effective teaching relate to what Willinsky (1990) describes as a '*pedagogy of proficiency*' (p.162). In reality, classrooms and teachers do not always operate proficiently - not because of any clear 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 model such as the NLS that prescribes the content and format of lessons. 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 the NLS 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.

### *The National Literacy Strategy*

Despite these concerns, 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). Evidence from national tests indicated some significant gains in attainment, particularly in reading. However, as with previous innovations, implementation varied across the range of schools and teachers (Ofsted, 2000; Fisher, Lewis and Davis, 2000). After four years Ofsted summarised, *'The National Literacy Strategy has had a significant improvement on the standards of attainment in English and on the quality of teaching over the last four years'* (Ofsted, 2002 p2). However they express concern that the quality is not evident in all schools. Similarly, 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), claim that there is *'considerable evidence ... that teaching has improved substantially since the Strategies were first introduced'* (Earl et al, 2003 p3). However, they also express concern about the variability across schools and teachers. They claim

*that for many teachers, gaps or weaknesses in subject knowledge or pedagogical understanding limit the extent to which they can make full use of the frameworks and resources of the Strategies. (ibid)*

Alexander (2004) ) goes further to argue that the strategies are basically flawed. He describes the policy as *'ambiguous and possibly dishonest, stylistically demeaning, conceptually weak, evidentially inadequate and culpably ignorant of recent educational history'* (p7).

This paper considers the process of change over the first three years of the NLS and presents evidence from case studies of a small number of teachers that gives some indications of the nature and process of these changes.

## **The research**

The research reported here has followed a small number of teachers since the introduction of the NLS. In the first year this was part of an externally funded project into the implementation of the literacy hour in small rural schools (Fisher and Lewis, 2000). This followed 20 teachers over a year through classroom observations, interviews and collection of children's work samples. The study continued into a second year with a questionnaire, follow-up interview and further observation of the classroom literacy teaching of twelve teachers (Fisher 2002). At the end of the third year a further visit with questionnaire, follow-up interview and observation was made to seven of the teachers who were still teaching in the same schools to consider changes after three years.

## **What teachers said about their teaching**

### *1999 - one year on*

In the interviews at the end of the first year of the NLS, teachers in the initial project were asked a general question about how they felt their practice had changed. Content analysis of the interview transcripts identified three kinds of responses about the change to their literacy teaching:

- those responses that referred to the *content* of literacy lessons;
- those that focused on the *process* of how they went about teaching the literacy hour;
- and those responses that indicated some change to the way these teachers *thought* about their teaching.

For example they commented on the increased range of texts they were using and how they were teaching more phonics than previously (*content*). More than half the teachers commented that the pace of their lessons had increased. Others remarked that they were doing more whole class teaching and had a sharper focus in each literacy lesson (*process*). However, only four of the 20 teachers' responses indicated their *thinking* had changed over the year. For example, three teachers, in addition to commenting on the sharper focus to lessons, explained how they now recognised why planning with

objectives in mind was important, *'before I was, sort of knowing intuitively what I was going to do rather than thinking about it in more detail'*, and another teacher said he had learned to *'simplify things by having less objectives each week so you can really work at something.'* These sorts of comments, which seemed to indicate a shift in teachers thinking about their teaching, were infrequent compared to those which seemed to relate more to what they were doing, *'you know what you've covered'*, *'We use a wider range of texts such as more poetry'*.

#### *2000 - Making it their own*

One of the most striking features of the interviews with the twelve teachers after two years was the way in which they gave a sense of having become comfortable with the teaching in the NLS. They spoke of the way in which their teaching had changed and some even said they found it hard to remember how they taught before the literacy hour. Not only did they feel that the NLS had changed their teaching but they felt happier with the way it worked because it was becoming familiar and they felt comfortable to adapt it to suit the needs of their particular group of children. This seemed to give them a feeling that what they were doing, although more structured and focused, was adapted to their particular context. They had also begun to reintroduce aspects of their teaching that had been abandoned after the introduction of the literacy hour. In the early stages it seemed to be felt that one hour was enough and there was no time for anything beyond the structured hour. At the end of the first two years they were mentioning additional things such as:

- Quiet reading, paired reading
- Story writing, writing in other subjects, work linked to projects, diaries, book reviews
- Using puppets, drama, circle time, speaking and listening activities, talking about books
- Spelling, guided reading, handwriting

In addition, five of the twelve teachers now did extended writing on one day of the week in the place of a standard literacy hour.

There was still concern expressed about the lack of time for children to reflect; a lack of opportunity to enjoy texts at length and the loss of spontaneity in their teaching. The

changes that these teachers saw in their teaching after two years of the NLS are summarised in Table 1.

Table One: Changes that teachers reported in their teaching after two years (N=12)

Numbers in brackets refer to the number of teachers who mentioned these points in their interview or questionnaire

<p>Teachers expressed pleasure that their teaching</p>	<p>had become more focused and structured (8)</p> <p>covered more areas of literacy than before (5)</p> <p>now incorporated aspects of literacy teaching from before the NLS that they regretted losing (10)</p> <p>was again becoming more geared to the needs of individual children. (5)</p>
<p>Teachers expressed concern that</p>	<p>there was too little time for children to reflect on their learning or read or write at length (8)</p> <p>Lack of flexibility and spontaneity in teaching (5)</p>

Thus it seemed that this was a group of teachers, most of whom had adopted the NLS into their teaching. Teachers certainly felt planning from the *Framework of Objectives* had tightened up their teaching. Most seemed to regret losing some of the freedom they enjoyed before but many were beginning to reintroduce those more creative parts of their teaching into the literacy hour. They seemed to have the confidence to adapt and develop the framework to fit their perceived needs. The key changes they reported that match the intentions of the NLS are

- an increase in explicit, direct teaching of reading and writing
- a literacy curriculum with clearly focused literacy objectives
- an increase in the range of literacy covered.

## 2001 - Embedding

At the end of the third year of the NLS, the seven remaining teachers were visited. All seven teachers said they still used the NLS objectives but some said that they had made changes to the format of the literacy hour. However, there were considerable differences between the way some of these teachers went about the observed lesson. These differences seemed reflected in two interrelated elements:

- Their model of learning: whether their teaching was aimed towards the learning of facts or whether it was aimed at the application of this knowledge in use.
- Their model of subject knowledge: how secure this was and whether they saw reading and writing as being made of a series of facts and skills to be transmitted or a process of great relevance and pleasure to be explored.

This can perhaps be best exemplified by reference to the transcripts of interviews and observations of teachers in 1998 and observations and interviews of the same teachers in 2001. Two KS2 teachers are interesting: Mr Ellis because of his change of opinion about the NLS after three years and Mrs Quick because of her conviction that her teaching had changed considerably as a result of the NLS.

### *Mr Ellis*

Mr Ellis was most enthusiastic about the introduction of the NLS. His opinion, given in autumn 1998 was,

*Brilliant, great, smashing, wonderful, marvellous, wish we'd done it years ago. What I like about it is that I feel I'm teaching something all the time, all the time. ....I think it is reskilling us, it's giving us the opportunity to communicate which is what we're supposed to be good at, so that's why I like it' And I like the pace of it, I like the feeling that you can drive it along and you've got some tasks to do, let's get at it. (Mr Ellis, autumn 1998)*

With a degree in American Studies he was knowledgeable and enthusiastic about English teaching. However, he appeared to have a rather prescriptive view of teaching. In 1998, as the NLS was just being introduced, he gave, as an example of a typical literacy lesson, giving children the task of writing six paragraphs and prescribing the content of each. At the end of the year, he was still quite enthusiastic about the way children's knowledge of language had developed and he enjoyed the pace of the teaching. However, he was finding the hour constraining and wanted to 'burst out'. In particular he stressed, 'it's very important to hang on to the sort of magic of language as well as you can be too analytical you can be too obsessed with learning objectives and you've got to hold on to

*what you feel is really important about language and how you use it.*' (July 1999). By the end of the second year he had opted to teach the literacy hour on some days but in other weeks not at all. He felt standards of writing had improved but was finding some of the planning and teaching 'bitty and mechanistic'.

At the end of the third year, although still planning from the framework of objectives and teaching literacy for about an hour each day, he said, *'this literacy hour doesn't suit me - 30 minutes, 20 minutes group work and then a plenary even if you haven't got there - I'm just not made like that.'* He said they had revised their use of the literacy hour and were now doing something that worked much better. In the lesson observed in July 2001, they were doing letter writing. Two thank-you letters to real people who had helped the school were written one after the other. There was a real purpose and an audience for the work but emphasis was on getting the letters completed and knowledge of the conventions of letter writing. The lesson contained a large amount of dictation. Mr Ellis told the children what to write and they wrote. There was some interaction with individuals as he moved around the classroom in the second half of the lesson, but mostly he decided on a sentence and they repeated it after him. When pupils made a suggestion, he often changed their wording. His relationship with children was good and he kept them on task. There was a lot of praise but very little direct teaching. There was no sense of the love and excitement of language that he referred to after the first year; nor of his love for teaching that he mentioned in the first interview. This lesson did not seem to relate to the model of teaching encouraged by the NLS nor to the framework of the literacy hour. Indeed, in this lesson three years on he seems to adopt a prescriptive model similar to the lesson with the six paragraphs that he had described three years earlier.

### *Mrs Quick*

Another KS2 teacher, Mrs Quick was literacy co-ordinator and English specialist. Well respected by the Local Education Authority (LEA) for her English teaching, she had been used as a demonstration teacher in the first year of the NLS. After two years Mrs Quick claimed that she frequently taught a literacy hour and always kept strictly to the framework of objectives. Like the others, she had adapted aspects of the literacy hour to enable her to reintroduce elements of her literacy teaching that she felt she had neglected such as drama and discussion. She also said she had changed her teaching in some way by the much clearer expectations she set for writing and in her use of focused objectives. The poetry lesson observed at the end of the second year reflected Mrs Quick's love of poetry and demonstrated how this had influenced the children.

*Mrs Quick gets on well with the children in her class. She lets them know what she expects and will correct them or dole out punishments immediately if they step over boundaries. She is positive about children's work and their contributions to group discussions and will award verbal stickers and applause when responses are good. The children are responsive in the literacy hour and at times are very keen to answer. Mrs Quick's love of poetry has obviously rubbed off on the class, as they spontaneously will recite chunks of poems.*  
(Field notes July 2000)

However, although she emphasised how much more structured and focused her teaching had become with her use of the framework of objectives, the observer noted that it did not seem clear what the objectives were. They did compare poems but she did not really explain why they were doing this. Although there is insufficient evidence to draw any conclusions here, there is a sense in which the change in this teacher's teaching, as she sees it, may not be fully realised in her classroom practice.

The lesson observed in the third year of the NLS was on the writing of playscripts. The class had done some work on Shakespeare and was now working in groups to produce a playscript of Alice in Wonderland. For the first twenty minutes she recapped on the requirements of playscripts, what they had already done and what they needed to do next. The children were then sent out to work in various places around the school in groups. The teacher moved around talking to groups and individuals. She showed high expectations of what children could do and understand. In the whole class session the sort of ideas she talked about were challenging but there was very little explicit teaching. The session was more like a lecture in which knowledge was reviewed. Questions were closed and more focused on checking children's knowledge and memory of previous work. When she changed to group work, she moved around interacting with individuals and there was more a sense of accepting children's ideas and encouraging them to try things. This lesson seemed to indicate that Mrs Quick is indeed following the Framework of Objectives in her teaching but that how she taught these in the classroom is not very different to how she might have taught four years before.

### **Change in teaching**

Although this small group of teachers changed at different rates and in different ways, there was a recognisable shift over the time. During the first year of the NLS (1998-1999), these teachers mostly worked hard to do what they were asked. They introduced a new structure to their lessons and tried new teaching strategies. Over the year some

teachers reverted to previous practice for parts of the hour but on the whole they followed the guidance and training that had been given. They mostly felt positive about the literacy hour but were concerned about the number of objectives and the pace of coverage.

At the end of the second year (1999-2000), the teachers seemed more confident to adapt the structure of the hour and the framework of objectives to the perceived needs of the children. Teachers were also re-introducing things that had been squeezed out by the NLS such as drama. Most were still enthusiastic about the NLS and felt it had changed their teaching for the better. However, from classroom observations there was a sense that, whereas most teachers had made changes to their planning and procedures, their thinking about children's literacy learning and how they interacted in the classroom showed less evidence of change.

By the end of the third year (2000-2001) they seemed comfortable with the changes to their teaching and confident in their practice. Nevertheless, most teachers had made some changes to the literacy hour; they had reintroduced some activities and sometimes abandoned parts or all of the literacy hour. They seem, to a greater or lesser extent, to have reconciled their view of literacy learning with NLS objectives and procedures and settled into a 'happy' accommodation.

The two teachers described above illustrate how teachers and classrooms are different. Teachers mediate the content of their teaching in different ways. Even with a given objective, teachers will choose different activities and different ways of interacting with children about the objective. The teachers in the study reported here implemented and adapted the strategy in ways suited to their model of teaching and learning. Mr Ellis even rejected something he had originally welcomed when he found he could not accommodate his understanding of it to his way of teaching. His case is extreme. Mrs Quick felt she followed the strategy and had made considerable change to her teaching. Nevertheless this snapshot of her teaching shows that, even when observed, she had not adopted quite as much of the strategy as she had claimed.

The OISE group under Michael Fullan posed 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?* How these teachers have evolved seems to reflect their own views of teaching and learning. Galton et al (1999) when they revisited the ORACLE classrooms, twenty years on after ten years of the National Curriculum, 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 certainly not the case with the NLS that ways of working have changed very little. There can be no doubt that the teaching of literacy has undergone a radical overhaul in that most classrooms now have an hour devoted to literacy each day. The range of texts used and the aspects of English covered have increased. Shared reading and, to a less extent, writing are well established. However, whether teachers have changed underlying beliefs about teaching and learning is more questionable. These underlying beliefs matter as they impact on the way in which any teaching method is implemented. Schön proposed that in order to understand professional practice it is important to distinguish the *'espoused theory'* as reported by practitioners from the *'theory in use'* (Argyris and Schön, 1974). He argues that professionals do not depend on applying their theoretical knowledge in practical situations. He suggests they rely to a large extent on knowledge grounded in experience. He calls this *'knowledge in action'* (Schön, 1983). In order to further develop teacher practice it will be important to encourage teachers to engage in reflection on this *'knowledge in action'* and on what actually happens in the interaction between teacher and pupil. Current concern with targets and the results of national assessment may make this hard to realise.

## **Conclusions**

While it is impossible to generalise from so few teachers, the evidence from this study raises some important questions about how far the literacy strategy has gone in *'changing for the better teaching approaches'*. Although for the first two years of this study teachers were developing in their ways of teaching literacy, subsequent change seems to be slower and may rely more on the teacher's existing model of pedagogy than any externally imposed model. Thus, although the range of content and strategies used in literacy teaching has increased, the underlying pedagogic stance may be more resistant to change.

It is time to take stock and reconsider pedagogy. Brian Simon, as long ago as 1981, proposed that there was no coherent view of pedagogy in England, unlike in Europe (Simon, 1981). As a result, he argued, teachers planned their teaching by a combination of pragmatism and ideology (Alexander, 2004). This appears to persist today. The teachers described above pragmatically adopted the framework of the NLS whilst at the same time remaining largely consistent in their style of interaction.

More work needs to be done to engage individual teachers in reflecting on their teaching and to address pedagogic principles – not only *what* teachers do but *how* they do it. However, although the Primary Strategy encourages schools to '*take control of their curriculum and be innovative*' and for teachers to '*have the power to decide how to teach*' (DfES, 2003 paras 2.4 and 2.7), it is hard to see how an individual reassessment of pedagogy is possible in a climate where teachers' freedom to explore is limited by a context of inspection and high stakes assessment. There is evidence that some teachers have lost confidence to develop and adapt teaching procedures despite encouragement from the centre. Further work needs to be done to investigate how change in teaching becomes embedded. There needs to be recognition that, whereas large-scale implementation can go so far, further development is needed. Policy makers might be wise to consider a different approach for the next stage. Rowan (1990) argues for a commitment strategy, as a means of supporting individual teachers in their development.

*The commitment strategy, by contrast [to the control strategy], rejects bureaucratic controls as a mode of school improvement and instead seeks to develop innovative working arrangements that support teachers' decision-making and increase teachers' engagement in the tasks of teaching* (Rowan, 1990, p.354, quoted Leithwood et al., 1999 p.18)

The teachers in this study appeared to be implementing the NLS more or less in ways that are congruent with their pedagogic stances. The issue then for education is how to move forward. What is important is that teachers have the confidence to reflect on the changes and develop ways forward that work for them with their children. This should not mean rejection of the innovation. Teachers should be encouraged and supported in developing their teaching, reflecting on what they do at the same time as how and why they do it.

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