



THE
**LITERACY
GAME**

THE STORY OF THE
NATIONAL LITERACY
STRATEGY

JOHN STANNARD • LAURA HUXFORD
FOREWORD BY SIR MICHAEL BARBER

The Literacy Game

The National Literacy Strategy, initiated in England in 1997, was the most ambitious educational reform programme in the world. While it achieved significant success, there are lessons to be learned at every level from government through local administration to school leaders and teachers.

The Literacy Game is the only systematic exploration of the reform programme, examining the origins, evolution and impact of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). Invaluable insights from the architect and original director of the NLS and its director of training provide both a vital introduction and a critical appraisal for practitioners and for students.

This illuminating text:

- sets out the political background and context to literacy education in England over a decade from 1996 to 2006;
- explains and appraises the rationale and design underpinning the NLS, thereby rebutting some of the folk-lore that has built up around it;
- provides an example of the principles and practices of large-scale system change;
- links the NLS to wider global research on system change and educational reform;
- evaluates the contribution of the NLS in advancing knowledge of the literacy curriculum in English and the development of pedagogy as a whole;
- considers the impact and consequences of the NLS on standards of literacy.

The Literacy Game provides a fully comprehensive contribution to a wider literature on the teaching of literacy and the management of educational change. This enlightening book will appeal to all policy makers and academics who are keen to know what did and did not work in the NLS and why.

John Stannard was director of the NLS, responsible for national implementation up to December 2000. Since then, he has been involved in evaluating the Strategy nationally, and working on related initiatives in other countries.

Laura Huxford was the training director responsible for the development and introduction of professional development resources and teaching resources from 1997 to 2004, and has had close front-line involvement with schools over most of the lifetime of the Strategy.

The Literacy Game

The story of the National
Literacy Strategy

John Stannard and
Laura Huxford

First published 2007
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

© 2007 John Stannard and Laura Huxford

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stannard, John, 1940–

The literacy game: the story of the National Literacy Strategy /
John Stannard and Laura Huxford

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

I. National Literacy Strategy (Great Britain) I. Huxford, Laura

II. Title.

LC156.G7S83 2007

302.2'2440941

2007004716

ISBN 0-203-94491-7 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-41700-7 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-415-41701-5 (pbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-94491-7 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-41700-6 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-41701-3 (pbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-94491-2 (ebk)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vi
<i>Foreword</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 The context and origins of the National Literacy Strategy	3
2 About learning	24
3 The literacy curriculum: a Framework for teaching objectives	46
4 The Literacy Hour	70
5 Differentiating the Strategy	93
6 Implementation	107
7 Securing the Strategy	126
8 Devolving the Strategy	142
9 Impact and evaluation	161
10 Politics and practice	181
<i>References</i>	200
<i>Index</i>	207

Illustrations

Figures

2.1	The ‘searchlights’	30
3.1	The reading–writing coin	54
3.2	National Literacy Strategy <i>Framework for Teaching</i>	58
4.1	Structure of the Literacy Hour	78
6.1	National Literacy Strategy infrastructure	119
8.1	High Challenge/High Support diagram	146
9.1	Key Stage 2 level 4+ English results	165
9.2	Key Stage 2 English results	165
9.3	Key Stage 2 level 4+ reading results	165
9.4	Key Stage 2 level 4+ writing results	165
9.5	Key Stage 1 level 2+ reading and writing results	167
9.6	Key Stage 1 level 2B+ reading and writing results	167
9.7	Impact of Primary Leadership Programme (PLP) and Intensifying Support Programme (ISP)	169
9.8	Key Stage English results: closing the gap	169
9.9	a) LEAS achieving 75%+ level 4 English, 1998; b) LEAS achieving 75%+ level 4 English, 2002	170
9.10	2002 Key Stage 2 to 2005 Key Stage 3: outcomes for one cohort by subject	173
9.11	2002 Key Stage 2 to 2005 Key Stage 3: outcomes for one cohort by gender	173

Tables

3.1	Outline structure of the NLS <i>Framework for Teaching</i>	52
3.2	Three phases of literacy acquisition	56
7.1	Outline Strategic priorities 1999–2002	134
7.2	Development priorities	139
9.1	National conversion rates: Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2	171

Foreword

Sir Michael Barber

The National Literacy Strategy changed the face of primary education in England dramatically and irreversibly.

As a result, the performance of the system is far better than it was. This is evident in the Key Stage results where the percentage achieving level 4 in English jumped from 57 per cent (1996) to 79 per cent (2006) and the percentage achieving level 5 also jumped dramatically. Relying on one indicator in education is always risky even when, as in this case, it is one based on good tests. However, the rise in performance is confirmed by every other significant indicator. International comparisons (PIRLS 2001) showed England's performance in reading among 9-year-olds had risen dramatically (unlike Scotland where there was no Strategy). Secondary school teachers noticed the difference in standards of writing, especially grammar. Most recently researchers showed that primary age children's spelling in 2005 was 12 to 18 months ahead of their equivalents 30 years ago.

Few if any other systems have managed such transformative change across so large a system in such a short time. The story told in this book is therefore significant not just in relation to literacy but also to generating large-scale change in education or indeed public services generally.

At the heart of the strategy driving the crucial first few years were John Stannard and Laura Huxford. Their account here is thoughtful, dispassionate, self-critical and thorough. Its importance lies in the fact that they have explained, at a level of detail, how the Strategy had an impact, classroom-by-classroom across a primary school system with 19,000 schools, almost 200,000 teachers and over three million children. Why is this so important? Because too much of the writing about education reform is at a level of generality and fails to grapple with the central question, which is how to get reform inside the classroom.

In this book John Stannard and Laura Huxford tell a remarkable and courageous story. Admirers will want to read it anyway. Sceptics should make sure they do because much of the criticism of the National Literacy Strategy has been based on misconceptions. The vast majority of potential readers, who are neither admirers nor sceptics but open-minded educators, will find it both fascinating and inspiring. Large-scale educational change is never easy but this book shows that it can be done.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Michael Barber for his support and assistance in writing this book, and for providing a foreword. We also thank Michael Fullan for encouraging us and for commenting in detail on an early version of the text. Professor Jill Bourne from Southampton University added to our motivation by pressing us to continue and providing feedback on the book plan and some of the draft chapters. More generally, we wish to express our gratitude to the NLS team of regional directors and the national team of literacy line managers and consultants with whom we have worked over the years. None of the successes of the Strategy would have been possible without them, in particular Steve Anyyll and Kevan Collins who took on successive roles as National Directors when John Stannard retired from the job. CfBT, who worked in the background of the NLS, as its operational and delivery agent for eight years, managing and supporting the national professional and administrative teams, have also contributed to the making of this book. Through discussion, corporate memory and tolerance of John Stannard's absence from his role of consultant for the best part of six months while working on the text, they have helped to bring it about. Most of all, we thank Becky and Richard, our respective spouses for their encouragement, forbearance and support.

Material from official publications is Crown Copyright and is reproduced under the terms of the Click-Use Licence by permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Abbreviations

DES	Department of Education and Science – name of government department responsible for education in England from 1964 until 1992
DfE	Department of Education – name of government department responsible for education in England from 1992 until 1995
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment – name of government department responsible for education in England from 1995 until May 2001
DfES	Department for Education and Skills – name of government department responsible for education in England from May 2001
Framework	The National Literacy Strategy framework of teaching objectives (see Chapter 3)
FS	Foundation Stage: from 2000–2006, the period of two to three years prior to compulsory schooling at age 5; from 2006, the period in a child’s life from birth to the start of compulsory schooling
HMI	Her Majesty’s Inspector – often used to refer to the inspectorate body
KS1	Key Stage 1 – period of schooling covering years 1 and 2, approximately ages 5–7
KS2	Key Stage 2 – period of schooling covering years 3–6, approximately ages 8–11
KS3	Key Stage 3 – period of schooling covering years 7–9, approximately ages 12–14
LEA	Local Education Authority – locally elected administration, roughly equivalent to a school district in other countries
NAHT	National Association of Head Teachers (professional association for head teachers)
NC	National Curriculum in England
NC levels	National Curriculum levels of attainment: level 2 is the expected level for children at age 7, level 4 at age 11 and level 5 at age 14
NCSL	National College of School Leadership, the body responsible for the professional development and qualifications for head teachers
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research

x List of abbreviations

NLNS	National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in England
NLP	National Literacy Project in England
NLS	National Literacy Strategy in England
NNS	National Numeracy Strategy in England
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, founded in 1992, responsible for inspecting schools and LEAs; HMI work within Ofsted
PNS	Primary National Strategy
QCA	Qualification and Curriculum Authority – responsible for National Curriculum and assessment
YR	Reception year – the academic year (September–August) during which a child becomes 5 years old (final year of the Foundation Stage)

Introduction

This book tells the story of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in England. It was and remains the biggest educational reform programme of its kind in the world. It has been a powerful and formative influence on the structure and professional culture of primary education in England and has also been a cornerstone in the development of knowledge about issues of large-scale educational reform internationally. The NLS has evolved and changed substantially over the years and has been a subject of widespread debate and discussion in England and abroad. Schools, politicians, researchers and critical observers have variously acknowledged its success and pointed to its weaknesses.

We have been closely involved with the evolution of the NLS since its inception. John Stannard was the architect of the rationale, literacy Framework and Literacy Hour and as director of the NLS, responsible for national implementation up to December 2000. Since then, he has been involved in evaluating the Strategy nationally, consulting at local authority and school levels, and working on related initiatives in other countries. Laura Huxford was the training director responsible for the development and introduction of professional development resources and teaching resources from 1997 to 2004, and has had close front-line involvement with schools over most of the lifetime of the Strategy. Inevitably, a reform on this scale and of such political and educational significance will generate a wide range of views and responses. Ten years on, and with the benefit of hindsight, we set out to explain the NLS and its evolution, to evaluate the evidence of its impact and relate this to some of the wider questions of system change and educational reform.

There are a number of parallel and intersecting stories. One is about the teaching of literacy, the underpinning rationale, the content and progression of the literacy curriculum and the fundamental teaching methodologies promoted by the NLS. A second story tells of the political context, motivations and commitments which shaped and drove the reforms, while a third story relates the NLS to the wider research on large-scale reform. Over a decade since 1997, the NLS has changed significantly. It began as a strongly interventionist process of 'informed prescription' (Barber 2002) and, alongside its partner National Numeracy Strategy, evolved into a Primary National Strategy to give increasing responsibility and autonomy to schools. In that time, it moved away from the largely 'top-down' approach, with which it was

2 Introduction

initiated, towards an approach which ‘saw the user, the implementer, as the key figure in the change process and reform as essentially a dialectical process’ (Hopkins 2004). It has been a fascinating and challenging journey but never a smooth road to travel. Much has been learned and we have tried to capture this in our narrative.

We have structured the book in ten chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the political narrative, setting the scene, describing the political and educational contexts which gave rise to the NLS. Chapters 2 to 4 deal with the fundamentals of literacy teaching embedded in the strategy – its rationale, content and methodologies. In Chapter 5 we take up the theme of differentiation, briefly describing how the common messages of ‘informed prescription’ were applied across a vast array of needs and contexts for almost 19,000 schools and the children they served. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 turn to the strategic and practical challenges of implementation, evolution, sustainability and the difficult transition from relatively strong central control to increasing school autonomy. In Chapter 9, we consider the evidence of impact, relating this to the government’s declared expectations and targets. In Chapter 10, we take up the political narrative again continuing the story begun in Chapter 1 about context and the effects of the continuing literacy debates. We finish with a plea for clarity and a renewed emphasis on clear implementation of a few key priorities.

The context and origins of the National Literacy Strategy

A brief history

We called this book *The Literacy Game* because it has an intimate connection with the ambitions for education reform set out in an earlier book, *The Learning Game*, by Michael Barber (1996). *The Learning Game* was written over a period immediately preceding the general election in May 1997 when New Labour came to power. It was a formative text. Barber's ambitions to eliminate failure through guaranteeing standards in the basic skills, the idea of the school as a learning institution, a learning promise for every child, the wider aims of creating a learning society and opportunities for lifelong learning, have all been echoed in ensuing education policies. The National Literacy Strategy, its partner the National Numeracy Strategy, the later, and symmetrical, Key Stage 3 secondary school strategy, the restructuring of the 14–19 sector, and the major redevelopment of early years' education, though not conceived in any detail, all find a place in this original vision. The book sets out an overwhelming moral, social and economic case for placing education at the centre of government policy. Barber's optimistic proposals met with much criticism but, with characteristic persistence and calmness, he listened to and investigated objections, worked out practical solutions and costed the proposals to create an agenda for educational reform that was politically viable and became highly influential in the formation of education policy over the coming years.

The Learning Game provides a detailed critique of education policy over the post-war years, focusing particularly on the preceding terms of Conservative government, at a point when that government was in its final years of power. Ironically, as we write this book, New Labour may be approaching a similar stage in its electoral life. The Thatcher years saw great changes; the two most indelible being the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989 and the creation of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 1993 out of the long-established and rather more benign HM Inspectorate of Schools. The National Curriculum established a framework of statutory, and publicly agreed, standards and expectations for schools. Ofsted, like Ofwat for water utilities and Ofcom for telecoms, became the new standards watchdog and regulating body for the delivery of the standards. In the context of the past 50 years both developments are relatively recent but they were and remain fundamentally important as the twin pillars of standards and accountability which define the key structures, responsibilities and working relationships of today's education system.

The conservative project in education, in line with reforms across other areas of public utilities and public services, was to create a market in which parents, as customers, would choose schools on the basis of preference and publicly provided information in the form of national test results and school inspection reports. By the same token, school autonomy was increased with devolved funding for schools, to take to themselves most of the key management functions, including the hiring and firing of staff. Funding was differentiated in various ways with some financial incentives for success, and extra resources for improvement to the weakest. Increasing devolution to schools also, and intentionally, diminished the powers of the local authorities. Many local authorities, especially those in the inner urban areas where school performance was typically weaker, were labour strongholds run by the opposition and frequently a thorn in the government's side. The most celebrated and adversarial conflict with the monolithic Inner London Education Authority was resolved with its break-up in April 1990, and signalled a changed, and much more assertive, relationship between government and local authorities.

Also, over the decade from 1985 to 1995, research into school improvement burgeoned, demonstrating irrefutably that (a) some schools had a big impact on children's success despite differences in socio-economic circumstances, (b) performance varied widely among schools serving statistically similar populations and (c) that weak schools could significantly improve through carefully directed intervention and support. The publication of school league tables along with the hostile practice of naming and shaming weak schools simultaneously raised public awareness and depleted professional morale. It also marked a growing and justified intolerance of school failure which became the hallmark of Ofsted's public success and influence. The fear that schools might be placed into 'special measures' massively strengthened government's leverage across the system and had a major impact on raising public awareness of school performance, especially in the key areas of school leadership and teaching quality. Thus, prior to the 1997 election, government policy on school improvement was framed around four core principles:

- the statutory National Curriculum to define standards and expectations for all children;
- accountability and public reporting through Ofsted to assure quality;
- devolved and differentiated funding to enhance school autonomy and enable each school to direct resources towards continuous improvement;
- parental choice to create a market as an incentive for schools to meet the needs of their 'customers'.

By the mid-1990s, under Gillian Sheppard, the last Conservative secretary of state, this policy framework had settled into a generally accepted *modus operandum*. The National Curriculum and its assessment was established, most primary heads devoted the greater part of their effort to dealing with management problems generated by the new devolved financial regime and Ofsted's impact was mixed. It had achieved notable success in exposing problems of the weakest schools and local authorities but

was having little real impact on school improvement. Inspection reports repeated the same message year after year about good schools being good, weak ones needing to get better, listing the characteristics of each and enjoining everyone to improve but without the wherewithal to contribute more than the most general advice on how to do it.

When Ofsted was created, a clear distinction was drawn between functions of inspection and advice – or pressure and support in the emerging jargon – based on the precept that inspectors should not evaluate their own advice to schools. Over the years, this distinction became increasingly institutionalized and persists today. Distinct and disjointed roles evolved for each function. Inspectors withdrew from any serious participation in support and training and, while auditing and listing schools' strengths and weaknesses, avoided putting their toes in the water of advising schools or prescribing practice, which was strictly a matter for each school to decide in its own way.

The new Ofsted 'hit and run' approach to inspection came to be reflected in the organization of local authority services, where school monitoring began to replace support as their principal school improvement strategy. Local authorities, the main providers of professional support to schools, had their support budgets top-sliced to fund the creation of Ofsted and further reduced through the devolution of funding to schools, seriously depleting their capacity to support schools. Loss of funding, combined with a new emphasis on local inspection and the monitoring of school performance, led most authorities to deploy their remaining resources into school improvement teams. The work of these teams increasingly focused on identifying and monitoring the weakest schools and coaching them through their Ofsted inspections, under pressure from their own elected members, to avoid incurring criticism of the authority, and the threat of penalties for poor performance.

Two other consequences contributed to the malaise. First, local authorities, encouraged by government, attempted to privatize their support services in an effort to claw resources back from the schools. They had to make money or go to the wall. Many failed, while those that survived generally did so on the basis of offering schools what they could sell rather than that which might help or challenge them. Second, the inspection/support division of labour also accorded differences of status to the two roles. Ofsted led the pack, but at the local level, school monitoring teams were the place to be if you wanted a career, while professional support and training progressively diminished. Thus the whole effort to improve was increasingly driven by pressure and the threat of public criticism. This, naturally, exerted itself most palpably on schools, who did their best to comply and stay out of trouble. It was a hard road for school leaders and teachers who felt increasingly exposed and criticized. The constant challenge to improve tended only to depress schools and deepen a growing culture of mistrust and blame.

There was no way that Barber's vision of school improvement, in a learning society with high achievement on a world-class scale, was likely to emerge from this unhappy combination of pressure and low morale. The system had, as Barber argues, important merits. No one in their right mind would seek to disband Ofsted or ditch

the National Curriculum. Later, in his role as chairman of the Literacy Task Force, he drew attention to the need for a judicious balance of pressure and support:

Without too much exaggeration, it would be possible to describe the history of the last thirty years as 20 years of support without pressure and 10 years of pressure without support. If we are to transform literacy standards in the decade ahead, we shall certainly need both.

(Literacy Task Force 1997: 14)

On the positive side, much more was known about the processes of school improvement. There was also a growing understanding that school improvement was largely a function of improvements in the leadership and quality of teaching. The challenge lay in how to exploit this knowledge effectively. In 1996, Chris Woodhead put his finger on it in Ofsted's Annual Report:

There is no doubt that if standards of pupil attainment are to be raised, then the quality of teaching must be the focus of everyone's efforts. Every government initiative ought to be tested against this key imperative. Will it help teachers to teach better or will it distract them from their key task? This must always be the question. So too, at the level of the LEA and the individual school. Children will learn more when teachers teach better.

(Ofsted 1996a)

Barber agreed but believed the point had much wider implications. The key was system-wide professional development for all teachers and a reciprocal commitment to self-improvement from the profession. Standards and pressure would remain but a massive injection of support was needed to balance out the pressure. Instead of using pressure to berate schools, it would be used as leverage to engage them. In exchange for big commitments in resources, high quality training, professional trust and improved working conditions, teachers would raise their expectations, learn new professional skills and focus seriously on improving their teaching; it would be a deal but not an option. A similar balance of pressure and support would be focused on improving school leadership with priority given to leading the curriculum, teaching and learning. The ambition: nothing less than the elimination of school failure. This brave outlook could only be realized through some serious 're-engineering' of the system where decision makers have to be deliberately ambitious and break with the traditional rules. 'Any government that embarks on re-engineering in education will not succeed if it lacks courage, determination and ambition' (Barber 1996: 251).

In practice, this process of reform would need to begin in primary schools with the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. In a second term of Government, it would move into the secondary sector, creating an upward pressure for change and a developmental pathway to improvement. Michael Barber was invited to advise Labour in opposition on the development of its education policy. Around the start of 1996 he was asked by David Blunkett, the education spokesman, to set up a Literacy Task Force, which was

announced at the Whitsun conference of the National Association of Head Teachers. The task force comprised literacy and school improvement expertise, those with experience of system change and large-scale improvement in other sectors plus a number of experienced and successful heads and teachers. Its job was to collect evidence on how best to improve literacy standards, and to make evidence-based policy proposals.

In parallel, at the start of 1996, government frustration with its inability to improve standards boiled over, triggered by Ofsted's report *The Teaching of Reading in 45 Inner London Primary Schools* (Ofsted 1996b). The survey found pervasive weaknesses in the teaching of reading in three inner London education authorities. Inspectors estimated that only about a quarter of the teaching they observed reached a satisfactory level and catalogued weaknesses centred on the quality of teaching and school leadership. Soon after, a similar report was published on numeracy. These were to become landmark documents not just because of their content, but because they were also designed for political impact, calling into question the competence of three under-performing Labour-led authorities.

To their eternal credit, the Secretary of State agreed to a proposal from the Chief Inspector to break with tradition and intervene in these and a number of other poorly performing local authorities with two parallel support projects to improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy through the National Literacy and Numeracy Projects. The projects, although initiated by Ofsted, were run by the DfEE, while Ofsted, along with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) evaluated them. John Stannard, at the time Ofsted's specialist English Adviser, was seconded to create and direct the National Literacy Project (NLP). Fifteen local authorities were invited to participate – none refused. Most but not all served urban disadvantaged areas; three large 'shire' authorities also participated. Demand exceeded supply and a further three were included at their own request while others had to be refused. The National Numeracy Project was developed in concert but with a different group of local authorities, allowing each project to grow and be tested independently. While Michael Barber was developing his proposals in *The Learning Game*, John Stannard and Anita Straker went to work developing pilot programmes for literacy and numeracy with common ambitions and a potentially transferable structure. A striking feature of these early developments was the way that both directors, independently, arrived at similar conclusions about the shape and structure of the support to be offered.

It was evident from the literacy report that merely providing resources for professional development was no answer. In fact the three London education authorities under scrutiny in Ofsted's report, aware of the problems they faced, had been making quite extensive provision but,

Although there was a great deal of in-service activity taking place it was often random and haphazard in its availability...Except for the initial support offered to most newly-qualified teachers, there was little to suggest systematic provision for the development of individual teachers.

(Ofsted 1996b: §93)

What schools needed was something much more specific and codified for teachers to use which would meet the objective spelled out in the report that:

...teachers must be crystal clear as to what their pupils need to know, understand and be able to do to become confident and proficient readers. The fact that almost half of the schools did not meet the requirements of the National Curriculum programme of study for reading suggests that these schools need to review their reading programme with all speed.

(*ibid.* §12)

This recommendation seemed sensible at the time but, in retrospect, was naive. It was not surprising that these and thousands of other schools across the country were not meeting the National Curriculum requirements. The requirements comprised broad and brief statements intended as a basis for devising detailed school-based programmes. However, constructing such a programme requires subject knowledge and detailed specification which may have been possible in some large secondary schools with specialist departments, but were beyond the ability of most primary schools. Typical of so much change and innovation in England it was conceived as a secondary model and ill suited to the structure and capacity of nearly 20,000 relatively small primary schools, where some 200,000 teachers each had to plan and deliver a ten-subject curriculum. Expecting every school to create its own detailed programme, re-inventing – or failing to re-invent – the wheel was well-intended, but unrealistic, inefficient and unfair. Typically, schools taken into special measures by inspectors had many of the features of those in the Ofsted survey and worse – weak teaching, inconsistency, overload on teachers who, in the absence of adequate structures and professional support, were re-creating the curriculum daily, and the predictable consequences of frustration, diminishing confidence, high staff turnover and pupil behaviour problems.

It was the recognition of these problems that led to the creation of the common structures in the NLP: a detailed framework of term-by-term objectives for teachers, a common approach to teaching through the Literacy Hour, a team of trained and expert consultants dedicated to training and support for all teachers within the common framework plus symmetrical support for head teachers and language coordinators focused on leading teaching and learning, to help them break out of the closed cycle of short-term management and day-to-day survival. The NLP was never intended as just a strategy to improve literacy; its focus on literacy had the twin objectives of raising standards and providing a tool for broader school improvement. This is what was said at the start and it proved to be so in practice.

Risking accusations of over-prescription, and with the authority of Chris Woodhead and Gillian Sheppard behind it, the NLP was launched, to be met with an overwhelmingly positive response. It clearly answered a need and provided stability, support and practical solutions for many hard-pressed schools. Heads were able to implement it with some confidence, not just as a fiat of their own invention, but as a solution with strong credentials and backing. Teachers' skills and the quality of debate

in schools about literacy improved dramatically; practice, almost at a stroke, became shareable because of its common language and methodology. Schools reported more interest from parents who, for the first time, could understand what their schools were trying to do. In many classes teachers said the Literacy Hour was having a positive impact on behaviour and discipline. Above all, there was strong anecdotal evidence that children viewed the Literacy Hour positively and that standards of reading were rising. The latter was later confirmed by the NFER tests (Sainsbury *et al.* 1998).

As the NLP became established, an expectation grew that it would be extended. No one was sure how but it was clear that here was the kernel of an approach to school improvement with potential for wider application. Michael Barber, now chairing Labour's Literacy Task Force, invited John Stannard to meet the committee and outline the aims and structure of the NLP. He was impressed and became convinced that the NLP and, in due course the National Numeracy Project, had the potential to be revised and scaled up as a first major step, setting the scene for achieving the broad Labour vision of transforming schools through improved teaching and learning. It was practical, evidently effective, with a clear, supportive and accountable framework. Above all, it was amenable to the large-scale professional development that Barber envisaged. The principles of the NLP were adopted. In February 1997, prior to the election, the outline of a National Literacy Strategy was launched to a key Labour conference at the Islington Business Centre, along with the publication of the Task Force's interim report. A summary of the report was circulated to every primary school in the country with an invitation to respond. Michael Barber, with typical attention to evidence, made a point of responding personally by phone to everyone who contacted him.

The state of literacy teaching in primary schools

Just prior to the publication of 1996 report on the teaching of reading in London, there was heated debate about its content among inspectors (HMI) within Ofsted. Although it was common for reports to be finalized and glossed by the Chief Inspector, some HMI felt it was unfair to pillory these three local education authorities (LEAs). Though no one could argue much with the conclusions, HMI knew perfectly well that most of the criticism levelled at the three unfortunates and their 45 struggling schools could have been levelled at LEAs and schools across the country. The LEAs were a shambles for all sorts of reasons but reading was taught no better in many of the schools served by well-organized and government-friendly authorities. Had the survey been conducted in three more affluent and middle class counties it could easily have produced a similar picture except with higher standards. At the time, differences in school performance had more to do with the children's capacity to benefit from similar teaching approaches than to any systematic differences in the organization or quality of teaching per se. This was a crucial point obscured in the furore over the alleged consequences of 'loony left' administrations in London but

salutary for the later development of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) which was about to challenge every school to do better.

In primary literacy, there are practices and there are theories. For the most part, primary teachers then, and now, have a passing interest in theories and tend to be more pragmatic. Their first concern, quite properly, is with what works and what they should do, rather than with psychological models, social theories or the adoption of ideological positions. For most teachers, successful practice means getting on with the job and doing their best for children with whatever resources are to hand. During the 1990s, in the background of most teachers' experience, the 'reading wars' (as they had come to be called in the United States) began to rage in England. Protagonists were mainly theorists, lobbyists and journalists of various persuasions, while primary teachers, by and large, were the contingent beneficiaries of mixed and partial messages emanating from each side.

At the same time, quite stark differences in practice were evident, between mainstream classroom teaching and the provision for special educational needs in primary schools. The former was populated by teachers, the latter mainly by educational psychologists. Teachers were trained in university departments of education and received a broad, but frequently inadequate, introduction to aspects of reading education. The postgraduate qualification for educational psychologists was taught and awarded by psychology departments. These departments were often in separate faculties and buildings with little or no tradition of common practice or interaction between the two. Most educational psychologists favoured 'bottom-up' approaches to teaching reading, with phonics at the fore-front – well justified for many of the children they were supporting – while primary teachers, with equal justification, took a wider view. The main conduits of reading theory to teachers were the teacher trainers responsible for initial preparation, the professional support staff in local authorities, and publishers' representatives who marketed reading schemes and programmes, and often had the greatest impact on practice.

Traditionally, teachers had regarded psychologists not just as doing a different job but as experts with access to 'remedial' knowledge which, like its medical counterpart, was designed for children with pathologies, rather than those in 'good health'. Methods used by remedial reading services were often perceived (not without justification) as meaningless drills reinforced by the conditioning effects of external rewards. Many teachers' felt, again quite reasonably, that methods such as these were out of step with the professional values they had signed up to. Nevertheless, despite the institutionalized stand-off, there was no great antipathy between teachers and psychologists who co-existed in their complementary roles. Teachers simply perceived phonics as a remedial tool which, like diagnostic testing, belonged in the specialist portfolio of the psychologist. They just did not see it as a big part of their job.

It was no surprise therefore, that Frank Smith's (1971) and Kenneth Goodman's account of the reading process, which sidelined the place of phonics and stressed the importance of active learning and reading for meaning, had a good press among primary teachers. Goodman's famous, and subsequently fatal, characterization of reading as a *psycholinguistic guessing game*, positioning alphabetic knowledge as the

last resort for the inexperienced reader, undermined prevailing practices in remedial reading and spoke directly to teachers (Goodman 1970). This new alignment was reinforced by a growing interest in *Reading Recovery* as a programme, which offered an evidence-based, proven and acceptable alternative for young, failing readers. At last it seemed that psychologists and teachers were speaking the same language and the uncomfortable disjuncture between curriculum values and the prescripts of psychology could be put to rest.

From this broad theoretical base, the so-called 'whole-language' or 'language-experience' movement grew up, with strong advocacy from teacher trainers, advisers and the English teaching community. Enthusiasm developed for reading 'real books', modelling and 'apprenticeship learning' and the teaching of reading strategies largely derived from the approaches set out in the *Reading Recovery* programme and, above all, reading for meaning. At the same time great emphasis was laid on the role of parents through projects such as PACT (Parents and Teachers and Children) derived from successful action research projects and the beginnings of 'family literacy' with its roots in school-based adult education (Tizard and Hughes 1984). There was a widespread movement away from using single reading schemes to structure progression in favour of levelled or 'banded' provision which grouped books from a variety of schemes along with other non-scheme texts to expand the range of books available to children at each level. Protagonists of 'whole language' theories such as Meek (1982), Waterland (1985), Holdaway (1979) and Wade (1979) were influential and their books appeared regularly in reading lists in teachers' centres and university departments of education.

Smith and Goodman's work was based on detailed reviews of existing research and strongly influenced by the psycho-linguistic theory of Chomsky and others. The psycho-linguistic influences on their work make very important contributions to understanding literacy which remain highly relevant, as we argue in Chapter 2. Other research was observational and action-based; some was more anecdotal and impressionistic – none passed muster at the doors of experimental psychologists. But nor was it anything like the nonsense it was later portrayed to be. Much of it, including the emphasis given to reading for meaning, motivation, reading response, quality texts, active learning, and the importance of developing self-monitoring and self-correction strategies, was fundamentally important to successful literacy development and remains so today.

Nevertheless, whole-language theories fell prey to two major faults. Firstly, as we argue in Chapter 2, Smith and Goodman were wrong, in fact, about the place and importance of alphabetic knowledge both in early learning and for experienced readers. Secondly, the recommended practices of whole-language theorists were hard to follow without very detailed training, and only a small minority of teachers did anything that resembled them in their classrooms. Most, for example, had never heard of guided reading and virtually no teachers beyond the first year of schooling engaged children in shared reading. When, in 1997, Ofsted set about making a video of good practice in teaching literacy, entitled *Literacy Matters*, inspectors had to scour

the country in search of examples of shared and guided reading. There was virtually no evidence, outside of the NLP, that schools used any of these approaches.

But, as critics were quick to point out, reading standards across the country were too low and there was evidence that they were falling in some areas (Turner 1994). In 1996, the same year as the publication of Ofsted's critical report, a campaign of swingeing criticism was mounted by the right-wing Centre for Policy Studies, with considerable support from Ofsted's chief inspector, Chris Woodhead, and an assembled posse of psychologists, lobby groups, right-wing newspapers and assorted promoters of commercial phonics programmes. The attack was led by Martin Turner and Tom Burkard. In a paper entitled *Reading Fever: why phonics must come first*, they catalogued what they described as 'the astonishingly destructive phenomenon of Whole Language policies', even criticizing the National Curriculum for having the temerity to mention the word 'stories' nine times in the first three levels of Attainment Target 2. In a single dismissive sweep of everything that had gone before they claimed:

Essentially, the tenets of the Whole Language movement have been that language cannot be split up into pieces, that learning to recognize words out of context offends against the wholeness of the text, and that top-down processes moving from the comprehension of the whole to deciding what individual words might be, placing meaning at the centre of the enterprise, are of paramount importance. Such an emphasis upon hallucination rather than evidence readily identifies itself as belonging to the intellectual milieu of the late 1960s.

(Turner and Burkard 1996: 7)

The final sentence is telling. Not only was this an attack on whole-language theories but a wholesale attack on primary school ideology and anyone of a more liberal persuasion who supported it. Phonics teaching was aligned with old-fashioned values of discipline, simplicity and drill, and chimed well with Prime Minister John Major's electoral 'back to basics' mantra. Turner and Burkard's polemical and dismissive tone gave them a spurious authority, especially since most teachers were too ill-informed about phonics to answer back. But there was justice in the criticism. Whole-language theorists were equally ideological, guilty of ignoring phonics and in denial about the growing weight of psychological evidence in its favour. Out of this critique, alongside similarly hard-line positions in the US, grew an uncompromising movement who were to be satisfied with nothing less than total victory for a reductionist agenda. They have not gone away.

For many teachers, the dispute had few immediate consequences. Practices in most schools bore little resemblance to either of the contested paradigms, though the posturing of the opposing camps, like noises off, contributed to a growing sense of professional ill-being.

On the positive side, there were increasing numbers of successful literacy initiatives, though they were widely dispersed through individual projects, and driven by the efforts of particular individuals. The *Literacy Initiative from Teachers*