TEACHING LITERACY EFFECTIVELY IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

David Wray, Jane Medwell,
Louise Poulson and Richard Fox

Teaching Literacy Effectively in the Primary School

Teaching Literacy Effectively in the Primary School takes a close look at the characteristics of teachers who are known to be highly effective in their teaching of literacy. Using findings from a ground-breaking research study commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency, the authors uncover a number of distinctive features of these teachers in terms of their literacy teaching practices, their knowledge and beliefs about literacy and its teaching, and their experiences of professional development. The authors also consider these findings with regard to their implications for policy and practice.

This book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the effective teaching of literacy, and of the qualities necessary in teachers if they are to provide it. It is essential reading for teachers in training, teachers in service and for those responsible for teacher professional development.

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Teaching Literacy Effectively in the Primary School
David Wray and Jane Medwell

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Series Editor's Preface

David Wray

There can be few areas of educational endeavour which have been more controversial than that of teaching literacy. Perhaps because, in an increasingly information-dense society, the ability to make sense of and to produce text is self-evidently crucial to success, even survival, literacy has assumed the major burden as a litmus test of 'educatedness'. With such a critical role in the process of becoming educated, it is inevitable that there will continue to be major debates about exactly what it means to be literate, and about how such a state might most effectively be brought about – that is, how literacy is taught. A proportion of the energy behind such debates has come from the diverse findings of research into processes and pedagogy. Yet much of the debate, especially in the popular media, has lacked a close reference to research findings and has focused instead on somewhat emotional reactions and prejudices.

Students of literacy and literacy education who want to move beyond the superficiality of mass media debates need access to reports and discussions of key research findings. There is plenty such material, yet it tends to suffer from two major problems. Firstly, it can be rather difficult to locate as it has tended to be published in a diverse range of academic journals, papers and monographs. Secondly, research reports are usually written for an academic audience and make great demands on practitioners and others who wish to understand what the practical classroom implications are of what the research reports.

It is to address both these problems, but especially the latter, that this series has been developed. The books in the series deal with aspects of the teaching of literacy and languages in a variety of educational settings. The main feature of all the contributing volumes is to provide a research-grounded background for teaching action in literacy and language. The books either, therefore, provide a review of existing research and theory, or an account of original research, in an area, together with a clear résumé and/or set of suggestions as to how this background might influence the teaching of this area. The series acts therefore as a bridge between academic research books and practical teaching handbooks.

Teaching literacy effectively

The first volume in the series exemplifies its philosophy. It reports a major research project exploring the characteristics of effective teachers of literacy. The aims of this research were to:

1 identify the key factors in what effective teachers know, understand and do which enable them to put effective teaching of literacy into practice in the primary phase;
2 identify the strategies which would enable those factors to be more widely applied;
3 examine aspects of continuing professional development which contribute to the development of effective teachers of literacy.

The book gives an account of the background, methods and findings of this project, but is concerned throughout to discuss what the findings of this project mean for teachers, headteachers and policy makers. It will, therefore, find a ready readership among classroom practitioners and school leaders.

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David Wray
University of Warwick
August 2001

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Introduction

Teaching literacy effectively:
an overview

Introduction

Given the powerful role of literacy in society, it is inevitable that standards of literacy and definitions of what constitutes 'being literate' should be a concern for educators. With the development of more and more uses and functions for literacy, it is certainly the case that children need to achieve ever higher standards of literacy to 'be literate' in their society. One major factor in raising standards must be the quality of the teaching of literacy that children experience, particularly during the primary phase of schooling.

High-quality literacy teaching demands high-quality literacy teachers, and any education system must attempt to maximise the expertise of teachers in teaching literacy. In order to direct improvements in the selection, training and professional development of teachers of literacy most profitably, a great deal can be learned from a study of those primary school teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy.

Such a study was the aim of the research described in this book. This research project was commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency with the aim of understanding more clearly how effective teachers help children to become literate. The research study involved a close examination of the work of a sample of teachers whose pupils were making effective learning gains in literacy. We also compared the work of these effective teachers with that of a more random sample of teachers whose pupils were making less progress in literacy. The book gives an account of the project, its main findings and their implications for policy and practice, as well as relating the outcomes to insights gained from other research and commentary.

Defining literacy

In order to begin a study of effective teachers of literacy, we first needed to be clear about what we actually meant by literacy. This, of course, can and has been defined very widely. For our purposes, literacy was seen as a unitary process with two complementary aspects, reading and writing. Seeing reading and writing in this way, simply as opposite faces of the

same coin, emphasised a basic principle in the National Curriculum for English (DES, 1995); that is, the need to develop children's skills within an integrated programme and to interrelate the requirements of the Range, Key Skills, and Standard English and Language Study sections of the Programmes of Study.

In the documentation underpinning the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), literacy was defined through an analysis of what literate children should be able to do. This produced the following list of statements.

Literate children should:
- read and write with confidence, fluency and understanding;
- be interested in books, read with enjoyment and evaluate and justify their preferences;
- know and understand a range of genres in fiction and poetry, and understand and be familiar with some of the ways that narratives are structured through basic literary ideas of setting, character and plot;
- understand and be able to use a range of non-fiction texts;
- be able to orchestrate a full range of reading cues (phonic, graphic, syntactic, contextual) to monitor and self-correct their own reading;
- plan, draft, revise and edit their own writing;
- have an interest in words and word meanings, and a growing vocabulary;
- understand the sound and spelling system and use this to read and spell accurately;
- have fluent and legible handwriting.

There were, in this analysis, three strands to the experiences that children needed in order to develop these competencies:

1 **word-level work**: i.e. phonics, spelling and vocabulary;
2 **sentence-level work**: i.e. grammar and punctuation;
3 **text-level work**: i.e. comprehension and composition.

The term 'level' was used here to refer to structural/organisational layers in texts. Each of these levels was seen as essential to effective reading and writing, and there was felt to be a very close interrelationship between them. At different stages of learning literacy, however, some levels, it was thought, would assume greater prominence in teaching. Word-level work might, for example, be much more to the fore in the beginning stages of literacy learning, even though teachers would also want to enable pupils to locate such work in the experience of meaningful texts rather than pursuing it as an end in itself.

The aims of the research

The aims of this research were to:

- identify the key factors of what effective teachers know, understand and do that enables them to put effective teaching of literacy into practice in the primary phase;
- identify the strategies that would enable those factors to be more widely applied;
- examine aspects of continuing professional development that contribute to the development of effective teachers of literacy.

The research was designed to answer these questions by gathering evidence in a number of ways:

- a questionnaire survey of the qualifications, experience, reported beliefs, practices and preferences in teaching literacy of a group of 228 teachers identified by the research team as effective in the teaching of literacy on the basis of a range of data, including pupil learning gains;
- observations of literacy lessons given by twenty-six of these effective teachers of literacy;
- interviews with these twenty-six teachers about the content, structure and organisation of the lessons observed and about the knowledge underpinning them;
- a 'quiz' designed to test teachers' subject knowledge about literacy.

Both quantitative data and qualitative data were collected to build up as full a picture as possible of the knowledge, beliefs and teaching practices of a group of teachers identified as effective at teaching literacy. For comparison purposes, similar data was also collected from a sample of 'ordinary' teachers (referred to as the validation group).

Full details about the research methods used are given in Chapter 2, and background details of the teachers involved can be found in Appendix A.

Research hypotheses

From a review of the existing research literature on effective teachers in general and effective teachers of literacy in particular, a number of specific hypotheses were generated, which our research then set out to test. From this review, three key areas emerged. Effective teachers appeared to:

1 systematically employ a range of teaching methods, materials and classroom tasks matched to the needs of the specific children they are teaching;

2   have coherent beliefs about the teaching of their subject;
3   have a well-developed knowledge of the subject and its pedagogical principles, which underpins their teaching.

A crucial point to make here is that, in the majority of areas, research had not yet demonstrated that these features were characteristic of effective teachers of *literacy*. However, we hypothesised that our research would suggest this to be the case and, therefore, we extrapolated from the general research on effective teachers, and from our own extensive knowledge of the field of literacy, to develop a number of specific hypotheses.

Methods of teaching

The literature on effective teaching in literacy suggests that there are several teaching techniques that appear to be linked with pupil progress in reading and writing. Our hypothesis was that effective teachers of literacy were likely to employ such techniques in a strategic way; that is, with a very clear purpose linked to the identified literacy needs of specific pupils. The teaching techniques we expected to find being employed included the following:

1   The deliberate teaching of the codes of written language. Such teaching was, we felt, most likely to be systematic, i.e. planned rather than simply *ad hoc*. 'Codes' here referred to textual features at word, sentence and text levels, and included:
    - sound–symbol correspondences, e.g. the most usual pronunciations of letters and letter groupings, letter recognition;
    - word features and their structures, e.g. syllables, prefixes, suffixes, inflections;
    - spelling patterns, e.g. *ight*, *ei* (as in *weir*, *their*, *weigh*);
    - vocabulary and word study, e.g. looking at synonyms, exploring word origins, vocabulary broadening;
    - punctuation, e.g. the effects of punctuation signs such as commas and question marks on text meaning;
    - grammatical constructions, e.g. subject–verb agreement, conjunctions;
    - text structures, e.g. narrative elements such as plot, setting, character; expository text features such as argument structure.
2   The creation of 'literate environments' that enhanced children's understandings of the functions of literacy and gave opportunities for regular and sustained practice of literacy skills, e.g. encouraging children to write for a range of audiences, provision of literacy materials in dramatic play areas, use of labels and notices to draw children's attention to the use of literacy, etc.
3   The provision of a range of models and examples of effective literacy practices, either provided by the teacher him/herself, for example by

demonstrating writing, including revision and drafting, or provided by displays of successful literacy outcomes and skill use, either from children's own work or from published materials.

4   The use of praise and constructive criticism in response to children's literacy work with a view to consolidating success, correcting errors and promoting growth.

5   The design and provision of focused tasks with academic content that would engage children's full attention and enthusiasm and was appropriate to their ages and abilities.

6   The continuous monitoring of children's progress through the tasks provided and the use of informal assessment to give a basis for teaching and reporting on this progress.

Belief systems

Teacher beliefs are theorised as being an important element of effective teaching. However, the literature is weak in terms of evidence about the ways beliefs link to practice, especially in the teaching of literacy. We therefore deliberately set out to investigate this linkage, and our working hypothesis was that effective teachers of literacy would have a coherent set of beliefs about the nature and the learning of literacy that played a guiding role in their selection of teaching approaches.

An example of beliefs not synchronising with teaching practice can be found in the writing lesson in which the teacher stresses to the children that the outcome should be 'an exciting story, with plenty of action and good ideas' but then proceeds in his/her reactions to their writing to emphasise exclusively the need for accuracy in spelling and presentation without reference to the declared criteria of excitement, action and good ideas. Such writing lessons are, according to the literature, not uncommon in primary schools, and most children learn very quickly to put their efforts into what their teacher *really* wants from the writing. However, we hypothesised that this dissonance between a teacher's reported beliefs about what he/she was aiming for in teaching and the real criteria for the task was less than effective in terms of children's progress. Beliefs and action that were consonant were more likely, we hypothesised, to promote such progress.

Subject knowledge

There is evidence that effective teachers of other subjects tend to possess a well-developed knowledge base in those subjects. Such a knowledge base appears to consist of knowledge about content, knowledge about children and their learning and knowledge about how to teach the subject effectively. However, it had not yet been established that effective teachers of literacy were in a similar position with regard to their 'subject'. We hypothesised

that there would be a link between effective teaching of literacy and subject knowledge.

In defining subject knowledge in literacy, we were forced to extrapolate from more general studies of subject knowledge and we used a three-part model to guide our research. Subject knowledge, we felt, consisted of:

1 Knowledge of content, i.e. what is it that children need to learn in literacy in order to be counted as successful?
2 Knowledge about effective pedagogy, i.e. what are the accepted principles underlying the teaching of literacy, e.g. the sequence of teaching, the contexts in which literacy might best be learned?
3 Knowledge about learners and how they learn and knowledge of the particular children in their class, i.e. how do children learn to read, write and use language effectively and what are the capabilities of the children in their classes?

The most problematic of the above was content knowledge. Defining this was complex, largely because content in literacy covers both knowledge (e.g. knowledge of literature, knowledge of the linguistic system) and skills. Literacy teachers teach children *about* reading and writing and *how to* read and write. Success in literacy is measured not by what children know about texts, print, etc. but by what they can do with these.

Literacy skills are, and should be, taught directly. It is well documented, however, that learners have difficulty in transferring their skills to alternative contexts, and in literacy this transfer can only be tested and observed in settings other than those in which the literacy skills were taught. To enable this essential transfer of skills in literacy, learners need to be given plenty of guided opportunities to put their literacy into practice. Content knowledge in literacy had, therefore, also to include knowledge of the ways in which reading and writing were used as tools for learning.

The relationship between content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge also seemed to be complicated in literacy. Some content knowledge is essential for learners of literacy but some may be essential for teachers, yet not directly useful in effective literacy performance. Linguistic terminology is an example of this. Although it is true that children need to know some linguistic terms, such as 'sentence' and 'word', there is little evidence that children's reading or writing is improved by explicit knowledge of such terminology as 'predicate' or 'subordinate clause'. Yet in order to plan effective and progressive learning experiences for children and to discuss the significance of language structures with children, teachers of literacy, we hypothesised, did need to have this knowledge.

With these considerations in mind, we developed the following component list of subject knowledge in literacy. In each component, we included the relevant knowledge of content, of pedagogy and of learners. Our

working hypothesis was that effective teachers of literacy were likely to have a sounder grasp of this subject knowledge than less effective teachers, and the list formed the basis of the subject knowledge instrument we developed for the second phase of observation and interview.

1 word- and sub-word-level knowledge (e.g. phonemic, spelling and vocabulary knowledge);
2 sentence-level knowledge (e.g. grammatical knowledge);
3 text-level knowledge (e.g. knowledge of text types and structures);
4 supra-textual knowledge (e.g. knowledge and critical appreciation of a range of texts).

This component list does require some exemplification to make it clearer. The expanded list, with examples, follows.

Word- and sub-word-level knowledge

- Phonological and alphabetical knowledge: e.g. knowing letter shapes, knowing that words are built up from letters and letter groups with sound values, knowing that a crucial unit in word attack is the syllable with its initial onset sound and its rime, knowing that analogy is a useful strategy in word recognition (having read *peak* makes it easier to read *beak*).
- Knowledge of spelling strings and patterns: e.g. knowing the patterned basis to spelling (there are a limited number of possible spellings for individual syllables), understanding the role of morphemes in spelling (*-ed*, *-ing*, *sub-*, *pre-*, etc.). Also knowing about typical sequences of development in children's abilities to spell conventionally.
- Vocabulary knowledge: e.g. being able to help children to explore word origins and extend vocabulary, knowing about synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and homophones. Also understanding the importance of developing a core of words that are instantly recognisable to children.

Sentence-level knowledge

- Grammatical knowledge: e.g. knowing word classes (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives), grammatical functions in sentences (i.e. subject, verb, object), syntax (i.e. word order and the relationship between words and in sentences), and having command of suitable language with which to discuss these features with children. Also having an understanding about the ways in which children acquire syntactic knowledge.
- Punctuation knowledge: e.g. knowing the uses and functions of a range of punctuation marks. Also understanding the likely course of children's learning about these.