Effective Teachers of Literacy: Knowledge, Beliefs and Practices, 3(9)

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Abstract

This article reports the results of research into the characteristics of teachers who could be shown to be effective in teaching literacy to elementary school students. The findings are based on a close study of a sample of teachers whose students make effective learning gains in literacy and of a sample of teachers who were less effective in literacy teaching. Important findings emerged from the research concerning the literacy subject knowledge, the beliefs about literacy teaching and the literacy teaching practices characteristic of the effective teachers of literacy. There were also several implications regarding effective professional development in literacy.

Introduction

This article reports the results of research, commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency in the United Kingdom, into the characteristics of teachers who could be shown to be effective in teaching literacy to elementary school students. The findings are based on a close study of a sample of teachers whose pupils make effective learning gains in literacy and of a sample of teachers who were less effective in literacy teaching. The aims of this research were to:

- identify the key factors in what effective teachers knew, understood and did which enabled them teach literacy effectively;
- identify strategies which would enable those factors to be more widely applied;

- specify aspects of continuing professional development which appeared to contribute to the development of effective teachers of literacy.

Effective Teaching and Effective Teachers

The literature on effective teaching has a number of predominant themes including school effect issues and issues related to the characteristics of effective teachers. The project reported here focused on the contribution made by the teacher to what children learnt in literacy. Research on school effectiveness suggests that variations in children's literacy performance may be related to three types of effect: whole school, teacher, and methods/materials. Of these three, the consensus is that the effect of the teacher is the most significant (Barr, 1984; Adams, 1990). Of the range of models put forward to explain the various components of school/teacher/pupil interactions, one we found particularly useful was the concept of 'curricular expertise', as advanced by Alexander, Rose & Woodhead (1992). By this they meant "the subject knowledge, the understanding of how children learn and the skills needed to teach subjects successfully." Effective teaching, they argued, depends on the successful combination of this knowledge, understanding and skill.

Most of the research into effective teaching is generic rather than specific to literacy teaching. In the 1970s a number of large-scale studies in the USA attempted to look at the effects of the teacher by searching for links between teacher classroom behaviour and pupil achievement. (See Brophy & Good [1986] for a review). More recent studies have taken a more complex view of the classroom and used multifaceted methods of research. Studies such as that of Bennett, Desforges, Cockburn, and Wilkinson (1984) looked at the classes of teachers deemed to be effective and Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, and Ecob (1988) studied teaching in junior schools.

Whilst the research offers little literacy-specific information it does give a range of findings concerning:

- teacher classroom behaviour, such as classroom management, task setting, task content and pedagogic skills
- teacher subject knowledge and beliefs, including content knowledge in a subject, an understanding of how children learn in that subject and the belief systems which interact with and enable such knowledge to be put into operation in the classroom

Effective Teaching and Effective Teachers of Literacy

There have been numerous attempts to establish the nature of effective teaching in literacy. Most of these have begun by analysing the processes involved in being literate and from this put forward a model to guide instruction in literacy (for example, Chall, 1967; Flesch, 1955; Goodman & Goodman, 1979). The argument has been that effective teaching in literacy is that which produces effective literate behaviour in learners. This sounds like an eminently sensible position but its main problem has been the difficulty researchers and teachers have found in agreeing on what exactly should count as effective literate behaviour, especially in reading. The major disagreement has centred around the relative importance given in views of literacy to

technical skills such as word recognition, decoding and spelling or to higher order skills such as making meaning. Such lack of agreement has led to proponents of radically different approaches to teaching literacy claiming superiority for their suggested programmes, but using very different criteria against which to judge the success of these programmes.

An example of this can be found in recent debates about literacy teaching. The whole language approach, for example, emphasizes language processes and the creation of learning environments in which children experience authentic reading and writing (Weaver, 1990). Whole language theorists and teachers stress that skill instruction should occur within the context of natural reading and writing rather than as decontextualised exercises. The development of literacy tends to be seen as a natural by-product of immersion in high quality literacy environments.

In contrast, other researchers and teachers argue that learning the code is a critical part of early reading and that children are most likely to become skilled in this when they are provided with systematic teaching in decoding (e.g., Chall, 1967). There is growing evidence that such teaching increases reading ability (Adams, 1990), especially for children who experience difficulties in learning to read (Mather, 1992; Pressley & Rankin, 1994).

There have been several studies comparing the effectiveness of teaching programmes using a whole language approach and programmes emphasizing traditional decoding. The evidence suggests that teaching based on whole language principles (i.e. the use of whole texts, good literature and fully contextualised instruction) does stimulate children to engage in a greater range of literate activities, develop more positive attitudes toward reading and writing, and increase their understanding about the nature and purposes of reading and writing (e.g. Morrow, 1990, 1991, 1992; Neuman & Roskos, 1990, 1992). Evidence also indicates, however, that whole language teaching programmes have less of an effect upon early reading achievement as measured by standardised tests of decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing (Graham & Harris, 1994; Stahl, McKenna, & Pagnucco, 1994M; Stahl & Miller, 1989). Teaching which explicitly focuses on phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondences does result in improved performance on such standardised tests (Adams, 1990). The picture emerging from research is, therefore, not a simple one and it appears that the nature of effective teaching of literacy changes according to the outcome measures used to evaluate it.

The debate described here is also, in the view of several noted analysts in the literacy field, a fairly dated one since it takes little account of rapidly changing definitions of literacy itself. Commentators such as Gee (1992) have argued that traditional conceptualisations of literacy are too narrow in scope and definition and it would be more sensible to talk about 'literacies.' Many writers and researchers arguing from a critical literacy perspective have suggested that literacy is so embedded in its particular social and cultural context that the emphasis upon 'schooled literacy' is hopelessly reductionist and does little justice to the diverse literacy practices observed to occur in a range of cultures (Heath, 1983; Lankshear & Knobel, 1998). Yet schools and teachers, for all their understanding of the changing nature of literacy, nevertheless owe their primary allegiance to the expressed needs of the particular social groups they serve and, given that success in 'schooled literacy' is still a firm requirement for success in wider social life, they can be forgiven for their emphasis upon apparently dated conceptualisations of literacy and its teaching.

An issue which has potential bearing on understanding of the nature of effective literacy teaching and which may offer a focal point around which conflicting research findings may be synthesised is the near impossibility of finding, and thus testing, 'pure' teaching approaches in literacy. Close examination of many recent studies which appear to support the explicit teaching of decoding and comprehension strategies suggests that embedded in these programmes there are often many elements of what could be described as whole language teaching, including, for example, the reading of high quality children's literature and daily original writing by children (Pressley, Gaskins, Cunicelli, Burdick, Schaub-Matt, Lee, & Powell, 1991; Pressley, El-Dinary, Gaskins, Schuder, Bergman, Almasai, & Brown, 1992). Similarly, when the programmes described by whole language advocates are examined closely, it is quite apparent that they do contain a good deal of systematic teaching of letter-sound correspondences, for example (Holdaway, 1979). These teaching approaches, in fact, are tending to become more and more alike and commentators such as Adams (1991) have suggested that there is no need for a division between teaching approaches styled as 'whole language' or 'explicit code teaching' in orientation. What has emerged in recent years is a realisation that explicit decoding and comprehension instruction are most effectively carried out in the context of other components.

Such rapprochement between previously contrasting positions suggests that effective literacy teaching is multifaceted (e.g., Adams, 1990; Cazden, 1992; Duffy, 1991; Stahl, McKenna, & Pagnucco, 1994). That is to say that it integrates letter- and word-level teaching with explicit instruction of comprehension processes and sets these within a context meaningful to the children in which they read and write high quality whole texts. Such an approach implies an informed selection by the teacher from a range of teaching techniques and approaches on the basis of a detailed understanding of the multifaceted nature of literacy and of the needs of a particular group of children. It does not, as Rose (1996) points out, mean the naive use of a range of teaching methods in the hope that, like shotgun pellets, at least some of them will hit the target.

The likely characteristics and manifestations of effective teaching of literacy, therefore, can be described, to some extent. The focus of our research was to consider what it was that effective teachers knew and believed about this teaching, and how this contributed to their effectiveness.

Designing the study

In the research, we aimed to compare the practices, beliefs and knowledge of a group of teachers identified as effective at teaching literacy with those of a group of teachers not so identified. To do this we identified two main sample groups:

- the main sample of 228 primary teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy;
- the validation sample of 71 primary teachers not so identified.

The effective teachers were chosen from a list of teachers recommended as effective by advisory staff in a number of areas of the United Kingdom. The key criterion for this choice was whether we could obtain evidence of above average learning gains in reading for the children in the classes of these teachers. We were thus operating with two interlinked sets of criteria for, and hence definitions of, effectiveness in teaching literacy. Effectiveness was first defined by

reference to the shared constructs of a group of senior and respected educationalists with particular interests and expertise in literacy teaching. This approach to selecting effective literacy teachers was the same as that used in the equivalent American study to this, carried out by Pressley and his colleagues (Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996). By itself, though, this selection procedure risks circularity and bias in the research outcomes as it virtually pre-defines the qualities of the teachers being investigated. We therefore added a further level of selection by checking the learning gains in reading, which had been made by the students of our chosen teachers. Teachers whose students had made less than average reading gains over the year (that is, their reading progress had failed to keep up with their chronological growth) were omitted from the final research sample. While we recognise that progress on standardised reading tests is not a perfect means of determining children's literacy progress, it did at least add an objective measure of teaching effectiveness.

Teachers in both groups completed a questionnaire designed to enquire into their beliefs about literacy and literacy teaching approaches, their feelings about children's needs in literacy development, their reported use of a range of teaching techniques and their professional development experience in literacy.

We then identified subsamples of the two main groups, including:

- a sub-sample of 26 teachers from the group of teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy;
- a validation sub-sample of 10 of the primary teachers from the validation group.

The teachers in both these subsamples were twice observed teaching and then interviewed about each of these teaching episodes. The first observation/interview focused on teaching strategies, classroom organisation and the genesis of these in terms of the teachers' experiences of professional development. The focus in the second observation/interview was on lesson content and teachers' subject knowledge. During the second interview, teachers completed a 'quiz' designed to test their knowledge about aspects of literacy.

Main Findings of the Research

In the space available here all we can do is summarise the major findings of the research. Much greater detail about these findings can be found in the project report (Medwell, Wray, Poulson, & Fox, 1998) which is freely available on request from the authors.

Teachers' Subject Knowledge in Literacy

Both the effective teachers and the validation teachers knew the requirements of the United Kingdom National Curriculum for English well and could describe what they were doing in terms of these. The effective teachers, however, placed a great emphasis on children's knowledge of the purposes and functions of reading and writing and of the structures used to enable these processes. They taught language structures and were concerned to contextualise this teaching and to present such structures functionally and meaningfully to children.

Even the effective teachers, however, had limited success at recognising some types of words (e.g. adverb, preposition) in a sentence and some sub-word units (e.g. phoneme) out of context. Units such as phonemes, onsets and rimes and morphemes were problematic for them and even using more everyday terminology for these units still did not guarantee success for the teachers in recognising them out of the lesson context. Despite this apparent lack of explicit, abstract knowledge of linguistic concepts, the effective teachers used such knowledge implicitly in their teaching, particularly that connected with phonics. It seems that these teachers knew the material they were teaching in a particular way. They appeared to know and understand it in the form in which they taught it to the children, rather than abstracted from the teaching context. This is an important finding, which we feel has implications for the content of teachers' continuing professional development.

Teachers were also asked to examine and judge samples of children's reading and writing. All the teachers were able to analyse the children's mistakes in these samples, but the way the two groups carried out this task was different. The effective teachers were more diagnostic in the ways they approached the task and were more able to generate explanations as to why children read or wrote as they did. In examining pieces of writing, the two groups eventually mentioned similar features, but the effective teachers were quicker to focus on possible underlying causes of a child's writing behaviour. Although both groups reached broadly similar conclusions about children's reading and writing, the effective teachers were able to offer many more reasons for their conclusions and to make these detailed judgements more quickly. This suggests a firmer command of subject knowledge relating to literacy processes.

Teachers' Beliefs about Literacy

The effective teachers of literacy tended to place a high value upon communication and composition in their views about the teaching of reading and writing. They were more coherent in their belief systems about the teaching of literacy and tended to favour teaching activities which explicitly emphasised the understanding of what was read and written.

The effective teachers translated their beliefs about purpose and meaning into practice by paying systematic attention to both the goals they had identified for reading and writing (the understanding and production of meaningful text) and to technical processes such as phonic knowledge, spelling, grammatical knowledge and punctuation. They tended to approach these technical skills in distinctive ways by using an embedded approach; that is, they gave explicit attention to word and sentence level aspects of reading and writing within whole text activities which were both meaningful and explained clearly to pupils. Teachers in the validation sample with less coherent approaches were less likely to show how technical features of reading and writing fitted within a broader range of skills. They did not necessarily ensure that pupils understood the connections between the aims and the processes of reading and writing.

Coherence and consistency emerged as being an important and distinctive characteristic of the effective teachers in several senses:

- their beliefs were internally consistent;
- their practice lived up to their aspirations;

- their beliefs included a belief in making connections between the goals of literacy teaching and learning activities and the activities themselves.

Teaching Practices: Connections and Contexts

The effective teachers were generally much more likely to embed their teaching of literacy into a wider context and to understand and show how specific aspects of reading and writing contributed to communication. They tended to make such connections implicit and explicit. For example, when teaching skills such as vocabulary, word recognition and the use of text features, they made heavy use of whole texts or big books as the context in which to teach literacy. They were also very clear about their purposes for using such texts. They also used modeling extensively. They regularly demonstrated reading and writing to their classes in a variety of ways, often accompanying these demonstrations by verbal explanations of what they were doing. One teacher told us a little about why she modeled writing for her class.
Researcher: "I noticed when you demonstrated writing you talked about the capital letters, the pronoun I and exclamation marks. Why?"

Teacher: "Its something I do from the day they arrive at school. I demonstrate writing. I talk about what is happening on the flipchart and they begin to pick up adult conventions without a 'formal' lesson. It's our everyday approach."

Researcher: "Do you do it often?"

Teacher: "Oh yes, whenever I am demonstrating, not just in writing. I am always talking about the conventions of writing and what I am doing and I feel they are learning an awful lot more if they realise that it is just part of writing and reading. When they are reading to me we discuss where the full stops come and commas and speech marks. I am trying to train them to an awareness of everything so that if they question they will learn. But if no one points things out to them they might not even ask."

Another teacher wrote a piece of personal 'news' in front of her students and engaged them in a discussion about this writing as she did it.
"I went to.. Well where?"

Children call out: "Cinema? Shops? Supermarket?"

"Yes, the supermarket. Do I put it here?" (positions pen at extreme right of flipchart)

Children call out: "No, other side, down."

"On the other side? And the next line? Why, why can't I start here?"

Children call out: "It won't fit, the word won't fit, you need a new line."

"OK on the new line so that we can read along and down.

Supermarket begins with ?"

Children call out "S, (s)"

"Yes (s) is the sound and the letter is called?"

Children call out: "S"

"Yes 's' for supermarket." (Sounds out as she writes) "s oo p er m ar k et. All together." (All join in as she points). "I went to the supermarket. Its the new Safeway I went to. Who's been?"

She was thus modeling not just how to compose writing, but also how to transcribe it.

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

The lessons of the effective teachers were all conducted at a brisk pace. They regularly refocused children's attention on the task at hand and used clear time frames to keep children on task. They also tended to conclude their lessons by reviewing, with the whole class, what the children had done during the lesson.

Links with Recent Developments in Literacy Teaching

Developments in literacy teaching in the United Kingdom have recently been dominated by the design and implementation of a National Literacy Strategy aimed at ensuring higher literacy standards in children leaving our primary (elementary) schools. This Strategy includes strong recommendations regarding the content and organisation of literacy teaching. In terms of the organisation of literacy teaching, its major innovation is the 'literacy hour' - a daily hour devoted to the teaching of literacy and subdivided into whole class teaching sessions followed by independent and group work sessions.

Although our research was begun before the National Literacy Strategy was devised, it was clear that there were several specific points of connection between the model of literacy teaching implicit in the Strategy and our research findings. We found that the effective teachers of literacy tended to teach literacy in lessons which were clearly focused on this subject (literacy hours). Within these lessons they used a mixture of whole class interactive teaching and small group guided work, with occasional individual teaching usually undertaken by a classroom assistant or volunteer helper. A good deal of their teaching involved the use of shared texts such as big books, duplicated passages and multiple copies of books, through which the attention of a whole class or group was drawn to text, sentence and word level features.

Implications of the Research

There are several implications emerging from the research in terms of future policy and practice in continuing professional development.

Access to In-Service Courses

There has been a long-standing tendency in the United Kingdom for literacy curriculum specialists to be targeted for in-service opportunities in literacy. Such specialists usually had positions of responsibility in their schools for coordinating literacy teaching and the expectation was that enhancements in their knowledge and expertise in teaching literacy would cascade down to their colleagues through in-school professional development work. There is evidence in our findings that this policy has had a positive effect on teachers who were literacy specialists. Most of the teachers in our sample of effective teachers of literacy currently held, or had held in the past, positions of responsibility for coordinating the literacy teaching in their schools. However, those teachers who had not been designated as school literacy coordinators had been somewhat restricted in the in-service opportunities available to them in literacy. We feel strongly that all teachers need professional development in this crucial area and recommend that literacy in-service work be targeted more specifically at nonexperts.

The Nature of Professional Development Experience

Our findings suggest that a particularly valuable form of professional development was teachers' involvement in longer-term projects where they had to work out practical philosophies and policies regarding literacy and its teaching, for example, through doing and using research. This contrasts with the predominantly 'short burst' nature of much current professional development experience. There are many professional development bonuses to be gained from a more active involvement of teachers in research and inquiry. Simple top-down training of teachers is less likely to result in significant development of teaching expertise.

The Content of In-Service Courses

The most effective in-service content seemed from our findings not to be that which focused on knowledge at the teachers' own level, but rather that which dealt with subject knowledge in terms of how this was taught to children. This implies a more practical approach and the teachers in this study confirmed that one of the most successful forms of in-service was that which gave them guided opportunities to try out new ideas in the classroom.

While we found little evidence that the effective teachers of literacy had an extensive command of a range of linguistic terminology, it seems likely that having a greater command might help them further improve their teaching of literacy. Such terminology could be introduced (or reintroduced) to teachers not as a set of definitions for them to learn but as the embodiments of linguistic functions with a strong emphasis upon the ways these functions might be taught.

The evidence from this project also suggests that the experience of being a literacy coordinator itself makes a significant contribution to teachers' development as literacy teachers. Schools need to consider how appropriate elements of this experience can be replicated for other teachers.

Conclusion

The research project described in this article is unique in the United Kingdom in focusing not on features of the teaching of literacy but on the characteristics of the teachers who perform this teaching well. There have also been very few comparable studies elsewhere in the world, the nearest equivalent being the research of Pressley, Rankin and Yokoi (1996) in the US. In the US study, however, effective teachers were chosen by nomination alone. Our research is distinctive in that we also used objective measures of teachers' effectiveness by looking at the learning outcomes they produced in their students.

We feel that we have made a significant contribution to understandings in this area and, we hope, have initiated a debate about teacher preparation, knowledge and development which has the potential to lead to major improvements in the quality of literacy teaching.

Further Information

This research was made possible by funding from the Teacher Training Agency. Further information about this project and a copy of the final report can be obtained from David Wray, School of Education, University of Exeter, Exeter, EX1 2LU, United Kingdom

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