A CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE
REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY:

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INTRODUCTION

The specification for this review was to focus on pedagogy and progression in language and literacy and not on teaching content. This means that we will not cover the issues that generally excite the media, such as the place of phonics in teaching reading, but focus on the broad teaching strategies and contexts that have proved effective. The review is divided into four parts: Part 1 deals with research findings on features of classrooms and schools that are associated with effective teaching of literacy. Part 2 deals with classroom teaching methods. Part 3 deals with issues of concern such as gender and the tail of underachievement; Part 4 deals with new literacies and the implications for teaching methodology.

Writing a review of literacy teaching that does not refer to content is problematic. Firstly, some content aspects (e.g. spelling, phonics; handwriting) are linear and the teaching can follow a reasonably straightforward, well-defined sequence of discrete lessons and learning outcomes. Others are non-linear, with pupils learning to orchestrate different kinds of knowledge and skills (e.g. reading comprehension, writing texts, storytelling, discussion/debating). Many paths are possible to the common outcome and effective teachers 'coach' pupils in knowing when and how to apply knowledge, building fluency and flexibility to promote robust learning. Systematic programmes with set sequences of teaching points and content are highly effective for 'linear' content. However, key parts of becoming a competent reader, writer, speaker or listener are not linear and teachers need to work towards broad horizons rather than tight and discrete goals. Alone, programmes of work with pre-determined teaching points will not promote the most effective learning; teaching needs to be responsive and draw on a variety of knowledge-bases.

Secondly, Marshall's (2002) research shows that teachers' beliefs about content affect their pedagogical values and their practice. For these reasons, this summary of research does occasionally refer to content, where this is important to the pedagogy.

PART 1: FEATURES OF CLASSROOMS & SCHOOLS

Scotland has taken part in two international surveys of literacy attainment. The Programme for International Student Assessment (Topping et al. 2003) compared 15 year-old pupils across 34, mostly OECD, countries. The survey collected information about pupil performance and about their individual home and school factors as well as about the literacy policy, resources and teaching within the schools. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Twist et al. 2003) looked at the reading attainment of 9-10 year olds in 35 countries and asked children, parents and head teachers about the home environment, curriculum, instruction methods and library facilities. Several key findings emerged from these two studies:

- The school climate matters: literacy attainment was significantly higher in schools where the head teachers were strategic and collaborative managers and where teachers' job satisfaction, expectations and willingness to adapt and change were high. The OFSTED (2004) report paints a similar picture: ineffective schools and teachers had low expectations, a tendency to blame external issues for low attainment and lacked strategic management of the curriculum and resources. Action in response to issues often took the form of a one-off event in a list of unrelated tasks. The head teachers lacked a first-hand knowledge of how reading was taught in the school or a clear understanding of how pupils learn to read. This uncertain knowledge-base meant that selection and prioritisation of new initiatives was poor.
- Highly centralised, tightly controlled teaching programmes, which allow little room for teachers to be involved in decision-making do **not** raise standards. Countries that topped the international league tables had well-qualified teachers who make school-based decisions to create a coherent literacy curriculum, including which resources to use. This is confirmed by studies on scaling-up educational reform (Coburn, 2003).
- Suitable infrastructure and library/internet resources do not guarantee high attainment, but their absence is associated with low attainment. Performance was highest where pupils used the library, internet etc. frequently (i.e. more than once-a-week).
- Teaching approaches that promote independent, strategic self-managed learning produce higher attainment. This includes teaching for control strategies such as pupils working out what they need to learn, which concepts they may not have understood, checking whether they remember and making sure they remember the most important things. An over-emphasis on testing and other ways of pressurising pupils to read were associated with lower attainment.
- Pupils' engagement with reading is crucial. This is not just promoting a general interest in reading, but harnessing pupils' social and emotional commitment so that they read a lot, in and out of school. The PISA findings indicate that high engagement can mitigate the effect of socioeconomic status, and has a differentially strong impact on the attainment of pupils from the lowest socioeconomic groups, effectively providing a means for 'closing the literacy gap'. The OFSTED study confirms that reluctance to read is not confined to low

attainers. The points it raises are that teachers rarely identify lack of enthusiasm as an issue affecting more able readers and that low attaining readers are often given no freedom to choose books and consequently see reading as a chore. Teachers that teach for high reading engagement read novels to the class, offer a wide range of materials, including comics, regularly give pupils, including low attaining pupils, freedom to choose their own books and actively discuss them. They play a significant role in introducing pupils to new texts but also consult pupils about what should be in the library and do not make gender-based assumptions about reading. They promote reading through activity clubs, peer group recommendations, and positive role models, particularly for boys. They intervene quickly when children appear to experience difficulties and actively work to build both self-esteem and skills.

PART 2: CLASSROOM TEACHING METHODS

Since the mid 1990s there has been increasing interest in the place of specified methods in the teaching of literacy, especially for disadvantaged pupils. Beard(1998), in his review of the evidence in support of the National Literacy Strategy in England shows how Slavin's (1997) programme, *Success For All* came to be adopted by many American states and influenced policy makers in a number of countries, including Canada, Australia and England. Key features of this programme include:

- A fast-paced, structured curriculum
- Direct, interactive teaching
- Systematic phonics in the context of an interesting text
- A combination of shared and paired reading writing

These were all adopted by the Literacy Strategy in England.

Interactive Teaching

Topping and Ferguson (2005) studied five highly effective literacy teachers. In shared reading activities, teaching involved much interaction and building on pupil ideas as well as making deliberate mistakes, which pupils were expected to rectify and explain, and structured peer learning activities, including games. They made use of humour and of pupils' interest in the book. The pace was brisk and non-teaching behaviour was rare. In general literacy lessons, all the teachers explicitly maximised time on task, balanced individual with small-group and whole-class instruction and engaged in modelling, questioning and scaffolding. They also built on pupil responses, balanced open and closed questions and engaged in coaching. Some expected behaviours were rare, however: the teachers did not engage in explicit strategy instruction, teacher summarising, pupil summarising. They didn't activate prior knowledge or generalise from activities. The teachers did not report all their behaviours, indicating that they were unaware of some.

The place of direct, interactive teaching, especially in whole class contexts, has proved to be especially controversial. While Rosenshine, Meister and Chapman (1996) have shown its usefulness in helping students to generate questions in discussion, and Alexander (2000) has shown how, in Russia, for example, quality and lengthy individual pupil/teacher interactions can be sustained while other children listen, a number of writers have argued that this is not the experience of children in many classrooms. English, Hargreaves and Hislam (2002) describe aspects of the extensive SPRINT project (The Study of Primary Interactive Teaching). They found that the need to maintain pace militated against high quality interactive teaching in practice. Teachers found it difficult to give children time to think or to extend their responses when they were under pressure, and some teachers left higher order questioning to the end of sessions, when all main teaching points had been covered. The result of this was that contribution of children in whole class sessions were rarely extended. In only 10% of instances observed, did children speak more than 3 words in response to a teacher, and in only 5% of instances, did they speak more than 10. Interaction, it seemed, despite the rhetoric of the strategy, had become a luxury.

The teaching of phonics has been another area of debate. While everyone agrees that systematic phonics teaching is necessary, there is no agreement over which method is most effective. Indeed, The U.S. National Reading Panel Report based on 100,000 research studies (IRA 2004) concluded that synthetic and analytical approaches were equally effective, especially if begun early in the children's school career and were sustained for two to three years. A recent evaluation of synthetic phonics (Johnston and Watson 2005) confirms that gains can be accrued by such systematic teaching, especially in the decoding of individual words. In other areas of reading, the results are more ambiguous. Gains in reading comprehension are less impressive, and although boys outperform girls in word reading tests, it is the girls who still display a more positive attitude to reading.

It might be that the shortcomings of the sort of direct teaching discussed above stem from an assumption that one teaching method works for all. This seems unlikely to be the case.

Activities and Tasks

Schemes and worksheets provide some evidence of coverage and superficial progression. However, one of the problems with relying on routine resources is illustrated by the research on teaching comprehension. The U.S National Reading Panel Report (IRA 2004) indicates that teachers use worksheet tasks to test comprehension rather than actively teaching it by explaining the reasoning and the mental processes involved in understanding (what to do, why, how, and when). The studies they reviewed showed that teaching explanations are best given through tasks that demand active involvement and encourage pupils to monitor their own comprehension, noting explicitly whether words make sense and whether the text itself makes sense. The teaching needs to be dynamic - when problems are detected, pupils should know to re-visit or reread the text. Direct teaching, modelling the thinking processes (from pupils and teachers) and encouraging collaborative meaning-building are all effective methodologies, if used in a purposeful way, with flexible use of teaching contexts, content (including prediction, analyzing

stories with respect to story grammar elements, question asking, image construction, and summarizing) to help pupils to understand. Guthrie and Davis (2003) show how low motivation for reading, especially in the middle school, can be ameliorated by teaching in this way.

Integration of language, literacy and the arts can raise both engagement and attainment. Grainger (2004) cites evidence to show that drama improves the quality of children's writing. Heath and Wolf (2004) found that art activities increase children's confidence in talking and also their competence; those who worked regularly with artists used more abstract verbs. Bearne et al. (2004) show that allowing children to combine drawing and writing provides a firm basis for teachers to assess children's learning. Talk is central to learning and research on all aspects of literacy confirms that it can raise attainment in writing (Corden, 2000), reading comprehension, engagement (Guthrie & Davis, 2003) and critical literacy (Smith, 1999).

PART 3: ISSUES OF CONCERN

Progression

There are research debates about the nature of progression in reading and writing, and also about how best to map children's progress. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) suggest that progression in writing involves rejecting early simple strategies that simply generate text and ideas ('knowledge telling' writing) and adopting qualitatively different high-order ones ('knowledge transforming' writing). They argue that the implications of this for pedagogy are that:

- Pedagogy shouldn't focus just on encouraging simple strategies, for example by helping pupils generate content ideas or understand genre - this type of focus breeds intellectual laziness.
- Pedagogy should aim for autonomous competence.
- Progression is not just about the more sophisticated expression of ideas, but about developing a different way of interacting with knowledge as the writer writes.

Marshall (2004) discusses the conundrum of describing progression in English in secondary schools. Because it is a complex and non-linear subject, she argues that it may be better *not* to frame progression as atomistic targets, but to describe it instead in terms of broad horizons which pupils work towards. To do this, they need to learn to orchestrate their knowledge, not simply fulfil discrete tasks and objectives.

Addressing the 'tail' of underachievement.

Stanovich (1986) noted that the gap in attainment between the best and worst readers in a class gets wider as children get older. Logically one might expect all children to improve at the same rate. He coined the term 'Matthew effects' to describe this and produced powerful evidence to show how struggling readers actually undertook fewer reading-related activities in class. The lack of exposure and practice in reading meant they made slower progress than their peers. As the attainment gap widened, unrewarding reading experiences multiplied and reading activities were avoided or tolerated with minimal cognitive involvement. Conversely, children who read easily undertook lots of reading

activities, found it enjoyable, read for pleasure and made rapid progress in reading and in other measures such as vocabulary and general knowledge. The term 'Matthew Effects' refers to a quotation from the Bible, "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath" (Matthew 13;12). Later work has shown Matthew effects operating in how children 'take' from interactive teaching, modelling and direct instruction; delivering the same lesson to all does not guarantee the same learning.

Myhill (2002) looks specifically at this issue. She notices how boys begin to show off-task behaviours much earlier than girls. She notes how whole class interactive teaching particularly disadvantages these boys, as it offers few opportunities for extended responses or pupil questions. Moss (2000) investigates the interaction boys make with texts. She shows how the common assumption that boys prefer the content of non-fiction books to fictional content is unfounded. However, boys who are struggling with reading, find that information books, especially those designed around and well supported by illustrations, enable them to hide their lack of expertise. Moss categorises readers into those who 'can and do read', those who 'can but don't read', and those who 'can't yet, read'. She argues that teachers would do well to direct their energy towards those 'can but don't read' pupils (often boys) and that concentrated input into this group raises the profile of reading throughout the class and yields benefits for all.

Grouping, Setting and Streaming

Efforts to focus teaching more accurately through grouping is another area of interest. Ireson, Hallam and Hurley (2003) investigated ability grouping in secondary schools. They found that although grouping into sets had clear benefits for progress of pupils in mathematics, it had no effect at all in English. Rather, it seems, in English, mixed ability grouping provides positive models for pupils, increases motivation and reduces behavioural problems associated with low ability sets. Harlen and Malcom's (1999) summary of the research evidence in primary schools supports this finding. They stress that it is what happens *within* classes that matters, not how those classes are constituted. Although they present no evidence based on research for this, they suggest that setting works best in situations where the advantages are maximised and the disadvantages minimised: where teachers rotate around sets, so that weaknesses in teaching are not focused on low attainers, where teachers plan jointly, and so remain aware of the learning experiences of all children, and where there is the flexibility to move pupils between groups according to the progress they make.

Intervention

The necessity of intervention for pupils who fail to make expected progress has also generated research. Clay's (2002) *Observation Study* is seminal. She argues for three 'waves' of teaching: the first, good initial teaching, should be successful with 85% of the class; the second should provide intervention for the remaining 15% of pupils who have made inadequate progress in reading and writing at 6; and the final wave should address the needs of the 3-5% of children who still fail to make progress. Clay argues that teachers differentiate *when* they put children onto a reading scheme, but do not differentiate the tasks or instruction once children are on the scheme; everyone works

through the same tasks in the same order, with the same teaching points. Her research shows that where tasks and teaching closely match children's existing understanding, fast progress can be made. Teachers first need to understand the cues and strategies readers use and then ascertain exactly what individual children can do in order to decide how best to work to make them more effective readers.

Other researchers have investigated the type and frequency of early intervention. Stobie et al. (2004), after studying three schools in Ayrshire, suggest that multi-stranded and interlinked interventions are more effective than single programmes. Robertson and Boyle (2003) demonstrate that interventions in three sessions a week is just as effective for struggling pupils as is five sessions: in both cases significant progress can be made. Intervention just once or twice a week has no impact at all.

An interest in individual pupils, rather than groups or whole classes, has led to other ways of looking at learning and progression. One effect has been to move away from a focus on the role of the teacher, and to look instead at the experience of the learner. Topping's work (2002) on Peer Assisted Learning is particularly interesting. In the contexts of reading, he shows how mixed ability pairings benefit both tutor and tutee. Controlled studies in a number of projects suggests the following results:

- Paired readers progress at about 4.2 times 'normal' rates in reading accuracy during the period of commitment
- Gains do not 'wash out' over time
- Low ability tutors produced tutee gains at least equivalent to those of high ability tutors
- The least able tutees gained more than the most able
- The least able tutors gained more than the most able.
- Social gains were also widely reported.

Motivation

An emphasis on what the child experiences leads one to look at affective, as well as effective, pedagogy. Fawson and Moore (1999) considered the role of motivation in reading and literacy engagement. They investigate the characteristics of reading incentive programmes that provide rewards of money or toys for reading a certain number of books. They conclude that such programmes, based on extrinsic motivations, are ineffective. Engagement, enjoyment and comprehension are motivational factors that need to be intrinsic to a task: they cannot be taught through external programmes. In England, Barrs and Cork's (2001) case study research into the relationship between texts and children's writing produced similar results. They found that a pedagogy based upon 'powerfully emotive texts' motivated children to engage more deeply in writing, and produced improvements in their work which, Barrs and Cork imply, were unlikely to have been achieved by a skills based approach.

Technology and motivation

ICT has also been considered as a motivational factor. Ferguson (2001) sees the use of ICT as part of a constructivist curriculum that encourages active learning through exploration and discovery. BECTA uses similar arguments to promote interactive

whiteboards. In their survey of the research evidence (2003) they claim that interactive whiteboards:

- Increase engagement and motivation, especially in whole class settings
- Facilitate student participation
- Encourage more varied and seamless use of teaching materials

We do not know the extent to which the novelty factor of new technology contributes to motivation. The International Reading Association summary of research (IRA, 2002) indicates that the both computers and parents can effectively teach phonemic awareness , but not as effectively as teachers. Hurd, Mangan and Adnett (2005) point out that spending on ICT in English schools does not correlate with increased attainment and Underwood (2000) suggests that what constitutes good literacy software is unclear. The question is academic for most teachers in Scotland; local authorities tend to contract external companies to provide software and teachers don't influence what is provided.

Whatever the technology, motivation inevitably decreases when children are confused or in an unfamiliar environment and are unable to demonstrate what they know. Fabian and Dunlop's (2005) study looked at transition between nursery and primary school. They found that differences in pedagogy between the two stages meant that there was little continuity for young learners, they couldn't show their competence and that this had detrimental effects on pupils' learning and progression.

Much nursery teaching involves educators *responding* to child-initiated learning whereas schools and colleges operate various forms of a *recruitment* model in which the teacher chooses the learning focus, activities and teaching points in advance and recruits students to participate. Fisher (2000) argues that children in the early years need this developmentally appropriate, responsive practice or it will be counterproductive to long-term goal of high literacy attainment.

PART 4: THE NEW LITERACIES

Since the 1980s (Heath 1983, Street (1985), there has been an increasing understanding that there is no single fixed literacy, but a continuum of literacy practices, socially determined and ever changing. The implications of this are two fold. First we are challenged to consider whose literacy practices we are promoting in school, and why some types of text have more status than others, and second, we are challenged to look to the future.

In schools and in research, these implications have manifested themselves in a variety of ways. Buckingham (for example, 2003) has led the field in media literacy in the secondary school. Marsh and Thompson (2001) in England and Haas Dyson (2002) in America, have considered the place of popular culture in the early years, and Luke and Carrington (2002) have looked at how traditional curricular miss both the local concerns of children in many primary schools and their interest in global media. While these developments look at first like matters of curriculum content, they are in fact pedagogical. They stem from an understanding that the teaching of literacy is contextual,

that the practices of individuals and communities are important, and that literacy and power are intertwined. Practitioners, therefore, adopt a pedagogy that starts from the learner. It acknowledges social practice and literacy variety, contests power relationships and explores what it is to be literate in a changing world.

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