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Key features of English primary schools where literacy thrives

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Background

PIRLS 2006 results show:

- England's average scale score for reading dropped to 539 (from 553 in 2001)
- England's rank order fell to 13/29 (from 3/36 in 2001)
- In percentage terms England's drop in reading score was exceeded only by Romania and Morocco, while 13 countries improved their scores.
- "The fall in England's performance is evident across the ability range." (Twist et al., 2007, p. v)
- **So what can we tell you about the teaching of reading?**

Since 2001 our government has:

- placed an increasing focus on the technical aspects of learning to read in the early stages;
- commissioned and accepted *The Rose Report*, a review of the teaching of early reading, led by Jim Rose HMI (Rose, 2006)

This concluded that:

“The knowledge, skills and understanding that constitute high quality phonic work should be taught as the prime approach in learning to decode (to read) and to encode (to write/spell).”

They could have taken a different path...

- The three major studies I draw on were commissioned by government agencies.
- But the findings of all three have been marginalised or deliberately hidden by those in charge of making national decisions on education.
- You might want to reflect on why this is that these sources of evidence have not been drawn on to plan the course of literacy education for England's children.

Sources of evidence

In England most of the evidence on schools where literacy thrives comes from three sources:

- A study commissioned by England's Teacher Training Agency (TTA)
- A study by Dr Graham Frater, (who used to be Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of schools for English) carried out for the Basic Skills Agency
- A study by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)

There is also one additional source, a study by myself.

None of these sources is recent, but there have been no more recent studies that conflict with their findings.

Study 1: Effective Teachers of Literacy (Medwell et al. 1998)

Aims of the research project

- Principal aims:
- “to identify the key factors of what effective teachers know, understand and do which enables them to put effective teaching of literacy into practice in the primary phase;
- to identify the strategies which would enable those factors to be more more widely applied”. (p.4)

Data Collection method used in Study 1

- Collection of qualitative and quantitative data from 228 teachers identified as effective (on the basis of a range of data), and a comparison group of numeracy co-ordinators through:
- a questionnaires survey of qualifications, experience, reported beliefs, practices and preferences in teaching literacy;
- Observations of literacy lessons taught by 26 of the sample;
- interviews with the same 26;
- a 'quiz' designed to test teachers' 'subject knowledge' about literacy.

Study 2: Observed in Practice (Frater, 2000)

Aims of the research project

- to identify the features appearing to contribute to successful literacy teaching to boys.

Data collection method

- Inspection of 15 schools where there was little or no gap between the literacy scores of boys and girls on tests taken at 10 to 11 years.

Study 3: Reading for Purpose and Pleasure (Ofsted, 2004)

Aims of the research project

- Principal aim: to identify reasons for the wide range in attainment in reading among primary-aged pupils and to describe key features of successful practice in the teaching of reading.

Data collection method used in Study 3

- 45 primary schools were studied – a national sample in terms of size and socio-economically.
- The schools were selected mainly for their particularly high or low attainment, when compared to schools in similar socio-economic contexts.
- The schools were visited for one day each by experienced inspectors who:
 - observed a number of lessons in each school,
 - held discussions with headteachers (principals) and other senior staff,
 - examined documentation, including reading records and test data.

Study 4: Interaction in successful literacy classrooms (Dombey, 2003)

Aim of the research project

- to identify patterns of classroom interaction used by highly effective teachers of literacy.

Data Collection Method

- Classroom observation and videotaping of five highly effective teachers of literacy to children aged between 5 and 8 years.

Findings at school level:

- “High standards in reading were underpinned by a whole school commitment to ensure that all pupils could read.” (S3, p.4)
- Effective schools identified pupils’ difficulties early on, tracked progress well and used intervention wisely. (S3)
- “Rapid, early coverage of phonic knowledge and skills ensured that pupils had a strong foundation for decoding.” (S3, p.4)
- They taught “a broad range of strategies early on, including the use of words recognised on sight, context and grammar.” (S3, p.4)
- “The headteachers of the effective schools were knowledgeable about how to teach reading and involved themselves actively in improving it.”, showing strong leadership and management. (S3, p.4)

- There was high quality leadership, including:
 - strong leadership from the headteacher
 - a language co-ordinator who was an expert professional.

- Teachers all focused on:
 - the early identification and targeting of weak readers
 - intensive teaching for targeted pupils
 - close attention to book selection
 - parental involvement
 - high expectations of behaviour and learning

- positive reinforcement as a consistent feature of all teaching
- pupils making books for other classes
- wide display of book posters, including some showing men reading
- the prominent display of new books
- regularly held ‘book weeks’
- the active promotion of handwriting, with special ‘booster’ classes
- the audit, updating and development of all literacy materials including library and classroom collections. (S2)

- “Connections [were] constantly made between learning and experiences, especially the experiences of language in the world of books that they were bringing alive for their children.” (S2 , p.107)
- In early years classes, plentiful concrete links were made between
 - familiar objects and experiences
 - the words children already used when talking about them
 - the written code they were acquiring. (S2)

Lively initiatives for promoting literacy included:

- a school reward system
- colour-coded bookmarks, signalling stages in the child's progress
- a visiting poet (male)
- a poetry day, when the normal timetable was suspended
- investigative reading in preparation for a residential visit
- drama and performances linked with books. (S2)

Innovative approaches included:

- the use of 'story sacks'
- 'Teddy goes home' to encourage writing by younger children
- the use of 'writing frames' (Wray and Lewis 1996) with older children. (S2)

Key findings at school level

- Effective schools recognised their weaknesses honestly and tackled these, knowledgeably and strategically. (S3)
- They had specific initiatives to involve parents actively in reading with their children. (S3)
- Most had well organised libraries and encouraged the children to borrow books. (S3)
- Although successful in raising reading attainment, “few were successfully engaging the interest of those who, though competent readers, did not read for pleasure.” (S3, p.4)

At classroom level, effective teachers:

- were confident in their use of the National Literacy Strategy, as they:
 - “drew upon its framework without being unduly distracted by its analytical layout.”
 - “were not pre-occupied by covering the termly content of the framework.”
 - “constantly made connections between text level work, and word and sentence level study.” (S2, p.109)
- “in general, placed a greater emphasis on children’s recognition of the purposes and functions of reading and writing and of the structures used to enable processes.” (S1, p.76)

- although “more likely to be able to pick out word types such as adjectives, adverbs etc., ...[were] less able to identify such units as phonemes, onsets and rimes and morphemes”. (S1, p.76)
- “Despite this apparent lack of explicit, abstract knowledge of linguistic concepts, these teachers were observed to use such knowledge implicitly in their teaching, particularly that connected with phonics.” (S1, p.76)
- “were more diagnostic “in the way they approached the task of judging children’s writing and “quicker to focus on possible underlying causes of a child’s writing behaviour”. (S1, p.77)

They also:

- “centred much of their teaching of literacy around ‘shared’ texts which the teacher and children either wrote or read together.” (S1, p.8)
- had “developed strong and coherent philosophies about the teaching of literacy which guided their selection of teaching materials and approaches.” (S1, p.8)
- had “well developed systems for monitoring children’s progress and needs in literacy and use[d] this information to plan future teaching.” (S1, p.9)
- “had a greater level of awareness children’s authors”. (S1, p.16)

Study 4:

shows that the highly effective teachers:

- encouraged children to take a more active part in classroom discussions and in determining the direction of activities. (S4)

Donna, a highly effective teacher of literacy talks of her approach:

“You’ve got to prepare. You’ve got to have a starting point. But what I always hope is that the children will take me somewhere I hadn’t thought of going.” (S4, p.48)

The future?

- A change of government is unlikely to bring an improvement to the situation.
- But in the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) we'll be continuing to
 - press the government to take note of the evidence
 - persuade teachers to work in more productive ways.

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