

The National Literacy Strategy: missing a crucial link? A comparative study of the National Literacy Strategy and Success for All

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This article contrasts two major attempts at educational reform with regard to literacy. Starting with a brief background to the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy, together with an analysis of research into effective literacy teaching, it presents qualitative research carried out in the form of a comparative study of the National Literacy Strategy and Success for All. This small-scale study of four schools confirmed the hypothesis that the underpinning pedagogy needs to be explicitly understood for such a large-scale initiative to be effective.

Introduction

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) has been held up by authorities on international change to be the largest and most ambitious educational project witnessed since the 1960s (Fullan, 2000). As such, it has been the subject of fierce debate and much research. This article starts by exploring the background to reform in the UK and then compares it with research into another large-scale literacy reform, Success for All (SFA), using seven key differences between the two strategies. It then goes on to analyse the results of a comparative study.

Background

A brief look at the background to the introduction of the NLS is illuminating. Before accession to power in 1997, the Labour party had set up a literacy taskforce which was charged with developing a strategy for substantially raising standards of literacy in primary schools over a 5–10-year period. The preliminary report cited international data, as well as local data, as being influential in the development of ‘best practices’

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(DfEE, 1997). They also referred to New Zealand research and practices. Indeed, a taskforce had been set up in New Zealand with very similar goals, but there the similarities end, as the New Zealand taskforce drew upon a much larger range of experience and research expertise. The New Zealand taskforce recommended increasing teachers' and school-based responses and developing best practice. The whole thrust was for the development of teachers' skills and knowledge so that they could implement best practice in the teaching of literacy with a stress on strong professional leadership. These recommendations form a stark contrast to the UK taskforce's preference for a 'framework' to structure and sequence pedagogic activities and to specify the content that was to be taught during the 'literacy hour' (Soler, 2000).

The stated aims of the NLS were ambitious in terms of improving standards and are summarized in the *Framework for Teaching* (DfEE, 1998). It is also interesting to note that it aimed to promote literacy instruction which is 'discursive, interactive, well-paced, confident and ambitious' (DfEE 1998, p. 8). The method of doing this was through the introduction of the Literacy Hour, which aimed to provide a balance between whole class, guided group and independent work. This brief statement, and a five-minute introduction included in the initial training for the Literacy Hour, provided the underlying pedagogy.

Success for All has been developed from work on cooperative learning by Robert Slavin in the US and it is underpinned by a philosophy called 'talent development', i.e. believing that *all* children have talents capable of being developed to meet high standards. The distinctive features of the programme are briefly:

- lessons last for 90 minutes per day and during this time pupils are grouped by reading ability, irrespective of age, and work cooperatively in pairs and groups;
- one-to-one tutoring is provided to support pupils who are judged to be falling behind their peers;
- eight-week assessments of pupils are carried out to determine any further re-grouping and any intervention needed;
- an Early Years/Foundation Stage curriculum emphasises the development and use of oral language through themed units;
- a programme facilitator is given 50% non-contact time to oversee the operation, training and implementation in each school;
- teachers and tutors receive detailed manuals, supplemented by in-service training days throughout the year;
- each school creates a Family Support Team to work closely with pupils, parents and the community.

Effective teaching of literacy

Before going on to compare explicitly these two strategies, it is useful to summarise what we know about the key characteristics of effective literacy teaching and recent research has shown the following.

1. Effective teachers have coherent belief systems about literacy which are generally consistent with the way they teach. This relates to adequate subject knowledge and Wray *et al.* (2002) state:

The clear implication of this finding is that to raise expertise levels in all teachers of literacy, some professional development opportunities at least need to be channelled to those teachers not already identified as expert. (p. 130)

2. Further support is needed in order to develop genuinely interactive teaching skills (the recommended model by the NLS). Moyles *et al.* (2003) found that:

for the most part, whole-class interactive teaching remains a one-way teacher-dominated activity. (p. xiii)

3. Understanding of the pedagogical theory is crucial to effective teaching, but as Fisher (2002) notes, during the introductory training to the NLS there was only a five-minute short explanation which looked at the rationale.

Harrison (2002, p. 16) specifies the five underlying elements of the teaching sequence of the literacy hour, which, interestingly, is nowhere made explicit in the training, as follows:

- (i) Identification of prior knowledge
 - (ii) Teacher demonstration of process
 - (iii) Shared exploration through activity
 - (iv) Scaffolded pupil application of new learning
 - (v) Consolidation through discussion of activity
4. An explicit understanding of the links between theory and practice is needed (Bailey, 2002). Bailey's research centres on the effective teaching of writing, and describes a 'fragile link' (2002, p. 23) between research and practice. The implementation of the National Literacy Strategy has, she suggests, led to an 'anxious literalism' (p. 26) which has in turn meant a discrete teaching of language skills and concepts, and a diminution of written composition.

Focus questions for research

The foregoing resumé of research into the effective teaching of literacy and key differences between the NLS and SFA has shown that the following are pre-requisites:

1. an effective programme of professional development;
2. teaching should be genuinely interactive;
3. a deep-rooted understanding by teachers of the pedagogical process; and
4. clear links made between theory and practice.

Key differences between the NLS and SFA

How these strategies met these criteria was my next question. My review of existing research elicited the following seven key differences between the NLS and SFA:

1. A learning theory which is specified and incorporated

In SFA, learning through the social construction of knowledge by cooperative learning is integral. Teaching staff are trained in using it and pupils work through a 'Getting Along Together' programme to develop cooperative skills. Cooperative learning (CL) has an extensive research base (Johnson & Johnson, 1989) which has shown three main categories of advantages: achievement, interpersonal relationships and psychological health and social competence. SFA uses one particular approach to CL: Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD) which rewards teams for the sums of its members' efforts. This approach has received criticism for introducing an element of competition and extrinsic reward (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Brown & Thomson, 2000) rather than being based on intrinsic reward. However, Slavin cites numerous studies to show its success (1996).

For the NLS, the underpinning learning theory consists of interactive teaching and while there is a statement of desirability: 'The most successful teaching is . . . interactive' (DfEE, 1998, p. 8), how this to be incorporated is not explicit. Critics argue that the concept is not well defined and that it mainly results in traditional whole class teaching. The findings of the study of Mroz *et al.* (2000), which were supported by the extensive research of Galton *et al.* (1999), found an increase in whole-class teaching and that the majority of questions used by teachers were either closed or factual. Further research has been carried out into interactive teaching in the primary school, in the form of a project entitled the Study of Primary Interactive Teaching (SPRINT), by Moyles *et al.* (2003). It concluded that although the NLS extended the rate of pupil contributions, it actually reduced the opportunities for extended interactions.

2. A school-wide programme which requires full staff commitment and restructuring

SFA is a holistic school reform model requiring a minimum of 80% commitment by all staff and organisational restructuring, e.g. through the provision of a facilitator and pupils grouped by ability, not age. NLS is a curriculum-based reform and requires no prior commitment by the majority of staff, nor does the organisation of the school require any restructuring.

3. Comprehensive materials and resources

For SFA extensive materials are provided which incorporate cooperative learning and metacognitive techniques. For NLS, extensive materials are provided, although these do not explicitly incorporate 'interactive' teaching, apart from some surface features. In addition, a major omission in the introduction of the NLS concerned provision for Speaking and Listening. The study of Collins and Marshall (2001) cites substantial classroom-based research on the importance of exploratory talk for learning. Cordon (2000) argues that considering an extensive body of research which demonstrates the relationship between talk, academic empowerment and

achievement, it is a 'shameful neglect' that 'having emphasised the centrality of talk, the DfEE chose to exclude speaking and listening.' (2000, p. 17). This has been addressed with the production of guidance on incorporating speaking and listening within the NLS Framework (DfES, 2003). It will, however, require extensive professional development in order for teachers to see this as integral and not merely an 'add on'.

4. *Commitment to ongoing professional development*

For SFA there is extensive training, particularly for headteachers and senior managers. Ongoing training for all staff is provided by SFA staff, together with support from 'expert' literacy teachers, or facilitators, in each school. For the NLS a cascade model of professional development has been used through centrally produced resources for literacy co-ordinators to deliver to school staff, plus ongoing training to co-ordinators and support from LEA literacy consultants.

5. *Inclusion of home-school links*

SFA includes a family support team set up in each school to address issues that may impinge on learning, such as poor attendance. No explicit provision is made for this in NLS. However, as part of the Primary National Strategy (PNS), the NLS is endeavouring to embrace issues of 'Partnerships beyond the Classroom' through work on supporting pupils with English as an additional language (DfES, 2005a).

6. *Tutoring*

An early intervention programme for children identified as falling behind is part of the SFA program, which consists of one-to-one tutoring support for the duration of need. For the NLS additional support for those pupils who are falling slightly behind for specific year groups is provided for set periods of time. A symposium of research on the strategy (Fisher *et al.*, 2000, p. 264) stated that there were valid concerns 'about the capability of the NLS to address the learning needs of *all* pupils which urgently needs to be explored. One size does *not* necessarily fit all'.

However, in December 2001, an intervention scheme, called Early Literacy Support, was introduced for year 1 pupils who were falling slightly behind their peers. Further intervention strategies have also been introduced for years 4 and 5. One of the key factors in instigating change in the teaching of literacy was the 'long tail of underachievement' and evidence that between one-sixth and one-eighth of adults experience problems with basic literacy, and this had persisted for 60 years (Brooks *et al.*, 1996). Interestingly, the much publicised report on reading standards from 35 different countries (NFER, 2003) highlights the improvement in reading in England, but indicates that the NLS has had little effect on this 'long tail of underachievement'.

7. The provision of a facilitator

This is in place in each school for SFA in the form of a teacher who monitors and co-ordinates the programme and is given approximately 50% off timetable time to carry this out. With the NLS, the literacy co-ordinators monitor the programme, but no non-contact time is specifically given.

Hypothesis

The foregoing all led me to conclude that in order to produce an effective literacy strategy, on the scale of the National Literacy Strategy, it requires firm foundations, i.e. teachers need to understand the underlying pedagogy: not just what to teach, but why they are doing it. My hypothesis was therefore that the National Literacy Strategy had a missing link—no explicit professional development on the underlying pedagogy, nor what constitutes the effective learning of literacy. In other words, ironically for many of its critics, it could be described as not ‘prescriptive’ enough. I sought, therefore, to put this hypothesis to the test through a comparison with Success for All.

Methodology

In order to collect information from schools on the quality of teaching and learning, which largely involved judgements by senior staff, I elected to use a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews. These were carried out with two schools using NLS and two schools using SFA, all in the same socially deprived inner city area of Hull within an Education Action Zone. My specific research questions related to the impact on teaching and learning from adopting either of these strategies. Interview questions therefore specifically related to teaching, learning and management of the strategies. The interviews were carried out with headteachers and literacy co-ordinators from each school. From this a conceptual framework was devised which aimed to show a clear comparison of the impact on teaching and learning. This consisted of nine key indicators (see Appendix).

Results

1. NLS schools

Interviews were carried out during the summer of 2002. The following significant comments were made by School B (using NLS).

- Training had initially de-skilled teachers and caused a loss of faith in their professional expertise.
- Lessons were too passive.
- Matching pupils’ needs was difficult.

- The work produced was inferior, there were too many ‘bits of things’.
- The school did not understand it initially and the personnel required to disseminate it were not sufficiently skilled.
- The three-part lesson had led to a positive impact across the curriculum.

Among comments made by School C (using NLS) were the following.

- Training that was provided in-house was better than that provided by the NLS.
- A key weakness was matching pupils’ needs.
- The NLS was not good at identifying pupils in need of support.
- Whole-class teaching was not always effective, as not all children were involved.
- There was inconsistency in teaching and application of the strategy.
- Key staff with expertise made a significant contribution.

Out of nine key indicators within the conceptual framework used for analysis of the interviews, both schools answered positively on only four.

2. SFA schools

School A (using SFA) made the following contrasting comments.

- Training had enhanced skills although there was an ongoing need particularly on the underlying ethos of cooperative learning.
- It ensured genuinely interactive whole-class teaching.
- The provision of a facilitator with non-contact time to monitor and enable the provision was crucial.
- It promotes the inclusion of all children in active learning, both less able and more able pupils.
- Learning was good with emphasis on oral work.
- It enabled good monitoring of pupils’ progress.

School D (using SFA) commented that:

- training had enhanced teachers’ skills;
- pupils were engaged in learning through team work;
- gender issues were better addressed, with boys less able to dominate;
- it was inclusive with classroom support assistants enabling the fast identification of pupils who were falling behind;
- the environment for learning was positive and active;
- pupils were much more engaged in their learning;
- high quality oral work resulted;
- a dramatic improvement in pupils’ learning;
- it has empowered younger children.

Both schools answered positively on eight out of nine key indicators used from analysis of the interviews, with both showing some reservation about the danger of more able pupils becoming bored through the predictability of the programme.

Discussion

My hypothesis was that the National Literacy Strategy had a ‘missing link’, i.e. a failure to incorporate effective teaching and learning and also a failure to make explicit its underlying pedagogy. To what extent, therefore, has this research illuminated this issue? In a limited small-scale review of four schools, it had shown some significant shortcomings.

First, ineffective whole-class teaching: the two NLS schools interviewed both commented on the passive nature of lessons, with not all children involved. In contrast, the SFA schools referred to teaching being ‘genuinely interactive’ with all children ‘engaged in their learning through team work’.

Ways forward could include staff examining what characterises interactive teaching. Some features are discussed in the PNS Excellence and Enjoyment learning and teaching in the primary years professional development materials (DfES, 2004a). However, there is a danger that teachers will focus on superficial gimmicks such as ‘show me’ or ‘get up and go’ activities requiring children to use mini-whiteboards to display answers or physical movement to respond to a question. The SPRINT project (Moyles *et al.*, 2003) highlights some of these problems and cites the research of Beard (1999) and Reynolds and Farrell (1996) into interactive teaching. This relates to a three-phase framework of questioning in which teachers use: (i) questions of increasing difficulty to solve a problem; (ii) rapid recall questions to assess pupils’ knowledge; and (iii) slower higher-order questions within whole-class discussion to promote pupils’ thinking. Alexander’s work (2004) on dialogic teaching echoes this third point. The emphasis here is on extending pupils’ thinking and learning and not focusing on speed and pace which may be detrimental to learning. In addition, for truly interactive teaching to take place, a radical rethinking of the role of the teacher needs to be examined. One example might be the work of early years teachers in the Reggio Emilia region of Italy where a teacher is seen as a co-learner and collaborator using Malaguzzi’s (1993) metaphoric description of a ping-pong match.

Second, the inclusion of all pupils: the NLS schools referred to ‘matching pupils needs’ as a ‘key weakness’. In contrast, the SFA schools referred to the ‘inclusion of all pupils in active learning in literacy’ with issues of ability and gender being well addressed. One of the principal ways in which this was achieved was through heterogeneous cooperative group work with a high emphasis on oral work. The PNS is endeavouring to address these issues, however; for example, by publishing research on boys and writing (UKLA, 2004) and guidance on inclusion (DfES, 2005b).

Third, inclusion of learning theory: both the SFA schools made reference to the ‘underlying ethos’ of cooperative learning and ‘the philosophy behind it—cooperative learning’ and its impact on teaching and learning. In addition, both schools referred specifically to the increased amount and quality of oral work. Neither NLS schools made any such reference and indeed referred to ‘bits of paving stones’ as if they did not fully appreciate the ‘big picture’. A way forward for schools could be through the PNS Excellence and Enjoyment learning and teaching in the primary years professional development materials (DfES, 2004a) which does include a section on learning to learn. The key issue for many schools is having the time and capacity to do this effectively.

Fourth, professional development: both the SFA schools indicated that the provision of an off-timetable facilitator to provide ongoing support, plus centralised training had been effective. With both NLS schools the quality of training relied on individual expertise of co-ordinators, who were not given as much time as the SFA facilitators to carry this out and with variable results. Setting up learning networks of schools may present a new model of ‘bottom up’ and not ‘top down’ centralised training. The DfES describes networks as offering the potential: ‘for genuine transformation based on the knowledge embedded in teaching practice.’ (DfES, 2004b, p. 2). The impact of these will make interesting future research.

Conclusion

While SFA would seem from this to be more effective, it is important to bear in mind the high cost of the scheme, requiring a teacher to be off-timetable for at least 50% of the time. In addition, resources were considerably more extensive than those required for the NLS. The schools studied here received funding from the Education Action Zone to implement the strategies, but for many other schools this would not be possible. Nevertheless, this needs to be set against the centralised costs of implementing the NLS (£205.5 million in year 2000–2001 alone; OISEUT, 2003). Both schemes have therefore incurred considerable costs, with a large proportion of centralised costs in the case of the NLS.

To conclude, this research has presented some initial findings to show the greater effectiveness of Success for All for the teaching of literacy. Further research would be needed to verify these results, in particular to probe in greater depth the understanding of all staff of the underlying pedagogy. To reiterate, the main differences centre around two main issues:

1. Explicit understanding of the underlying pedagogy and how this impacts on learning through ongoing and effective professional development.
2. The inclusion of all pupils in effective learning.

These principle differences need to be addressed in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the NLS. The Primary National Strategy is seeking to

address some of these issues in 2005, in particular through the Excellence and Enjoyment Professional Development materials (DfES, 2004a). However, it is an ambitious task and its success will require careful evaluation.

The results from this small-scale study bear out the original hypothesis that an improvement in teaching and learning requires an explicit understanding of the underlying pedagogy, i.e. teachers need to know not only what to do, but why they do it.

Notes on contributor

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Appendix. Analysis of interviews using key indicators

School	Section B			Section C				Section D			Overall
	B1	B2	C1	C2	C3	C4	D1	D2	D3	No of positive responses	
A (SFA)	Very enhanced teaching skills	Genuinely interactive	Improved	Good provision	More able stretched	High cost Improved attitude.	Positive impact	Pupils active. Danger of being boring.	Big improvement in reading	8/9	
B (NLS)	Enhanced but initially deskilled.	More group work. Three-part lesson now a model.	Improved especially through feedback	School own system. Later some provision	Due to teacher's initiative.	New resources have impacted.	Greater variety but no impact on learning	Pupils too passive. More on task.	Behaviour more positive but problems providing for different learning styles.	4/9	
C (NLS)	Knowledge increased, still needs developing In house training more effective.	A balance of whole class and group work.	Developed anyway not due to NLS.	Not always effective in identifying pupils	This is still an issue.	Impressive response by pupils.	Objectives displayed Learning made clearer.	Danger some children dominate. Depends on teacher.	Overall improvement	4/9	
D (SFA)	Knowledge increased especially phonics and vocabulary	Children are engaged all the time. Strengths of teamwork.	Improved—constructive feedback.	Individual tracking system – also diagnostic.	More able provided for—grouped by ability not age.	Big expense. Materials motivated quality and no of copies helped.	Layout facilitated learning and co-operative learning	Children active. Work well in groups. Good for younger children.	Definite overall improvement empowered younger children.	8/9	

Coding of key indicators:

- Section B. Impact on teaching
- As a result of this training, are teachers' skills in teaching literacy, enhanced? (B1)
- What has been the impact on overall teaching style? (B2)
- Section C. Management:
- Has the monitoring of teaching shown an improvement in the quality of teaching? (C1)
- Does the strategy provide guidance on pupils who are not making sufficient progress? (C2)
- Does the strategy provide for the more able pupil? (C3)
- Have new resources had an impact on pupils' learning?
- Section D. Impact on learning:
- Does the organisation/layout of the classroom impact on pupils' learning? (D1)
- How does the structure of the lesson impact on pupils' learning? (D2)
- What improvements have you seen in pupils' learning? (D3)