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Introduction

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in England was set up by the in-coming government of 1997 to raise standards of literacy in English primary [elementary] schools (5-11 year olds) over a five to ten year period. It built upon some initiatives taken in the final year of the out-going government of 1992-97, further adding to centralised government responses to some major concerns about pupil [student] attainment, teaching approaches and the professional development of teachers that had been identified in research and in inspections of schools during the previous ten years or so.

The NLS appears to have increased pupil attainment in primary school children, as measured in the results from the national tests that are annually administered to 11 year olds. There has also been a marked improvement in England's position in the international league tables of the reading literacy of elementary school children. At the same time, the NLS has presented substantial demands on teachers, by introducing new teaching approaches and by making considerable demands on their subject knowledge.

It is timely to take stock of the origins and evaluations of the Strategy and to consider the implications for programmes of educational change in other parts of the world. The Strategy (together with the companion National Numeracy Strategy, which is not being discussed here) has been described by a world authority on educational change as the most ambitious large-scale strategy of educational reform witnessed since the 1960s (Fullan, 2000:1). As such, it can provide insights into the complex relationships between research, policy and practice. It also highlights the importance of pedagogical knowledge in the implementation of educational policies and the need to allow for the unanticipated consequences of implementation.

The origins of the NLS

The origins of the NLS may be better understood by taking account of the increasing centralisation of education policy by the UK government from the late 1980s onwards: in curriculum content; in national testing; in inspections of schools; and, finally, in guidance on how to teach. Each of these four strands of centralisation has evolved from four different quasi-autonomous central government organisations – all of which have different degrees of delegated powers. Each strand of centralisation has made a distinctive contribution to the critical mass of central policy, but each has also brought with it the potential to undermine or distort the impact of one or more of the others. It needs also to be noted that each centralising strand has itself undergone radical transformation, thus adding to the demands on the professionals whose implementation of policy rests on their understanding of the implications for practice.

A national curriculum

The first centralising strand was the introduction of a national curriculum in all four UK countries in 1989, although the actual content varied from country to country. In England (DES, 1989), several epistemological decisions were taken by the body delegated to oversee the national curriculum, then called the National Curriculum Council, which were to have long-term impact.

Firstly, the decision was taken to divide the primary school curriculum in line with the subjects of the secondary school curriculum, rather than use a transitional curriculum framework for bridging the early and secondary school years (Beard, 1999b). The primary school curriculum had not been so subject-based before then, either in the work of teachers or in that of central government inspectors (e.g. DES, 1978).

Secondly, of the nine subjects (later, ten, when ICT was added as a separate subject) given statutory status for primary schools, three were granted a privileged position: English, mathematics, and science. These were to be the

'core' subjects, were to be given more time and emphasis than the others and would in turn be the ones for which national tests were devised.

Thirdly, the naming of one core subject as 'English', rather then 'language and literacy' which had been the term used by previous central government inspection reports (e.g., DES, 1978), brought with it the curriculum hegemony of English as a secondary subject.

The new national curriculum for English provided for the equitable division of its programmes of study between the three elements of Speaking and Listening, Reading and Writing. In England, the subject of English has a long-established tradition of giving particular attention to literature and literary theory and the national curriculum appeared predictably strong in this area. However, the new national curriculum for English appeared far less informed by *psychological* research in language and literacy. Indeed, there was not a psychologist on the National Curriculum Council committee that was responsible for drawing up the English curriculum.

The alignment of the field towards an 'English', rather than a 'language and literacy', paradigm may help explain why, in the 43 pages of the 1989 national curriculum for English for primary schools, there was only one mention of *phonics*, the teaching method that helps children to build their understanding of phoneme-grapheme correspondences of written English (Beard & Willcocks, 2002). This parsimonious reference seemed to fly in the face of a major research synthesis on early reading that was undertaken by the USA Congress at the time when the national curriculum in England was being written (Adams, 1990). The synthesis provided substantial evidence of the importance and complexity of phonics in the teaching and learning of reading. In contrast, the first version of the national curriculum seemed more influenced by 'whole language' theories of literacy, in which meaning and motivation in reading were given relatively more attention than decoding skills and comprehension processes.

The first version of the curriculum also seemed insufficiently informed by the experimental research in writing that was undertaken in the 1980s. For instance, while the curriculum emphasised range in the 'forms' (outcomes) from writing, it may have been disproportionately influenced by the 'process writing' ideas that were influential at the time (e.g. Graves, 1983). The national curriculum did not seem to take account of research in the *composing* of writing (in accessing and structuring content in different discourse structures) and the implications for teaching that related to it (e.g. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Hillocks, 1986, 1995). As with the teaching of phonics, this apparent neglect may have distorted the national curriculum and placed at risk its effective implementation and also that of the NLS that was eventually built upon the national curriculum.

After several evaluations, research studies and inspection reports, the national curriculum was revised for 1995 after a review chaired by a senior civil servant (Dearing, 1994). In the revised version, ‘key skills’ for reading in the early years (5-7 year olds) were spelled out in far greater detail. The revised curriculum stated that, ‘within a balanced and coherent programme,’ pupils should be taught to use several sources of knowledge, understanding and skills, including: phonic knowledge, graphic knowledge, word recognition, grammatical knowledge and contextual understanding (DfE, 1995, pp.6-7). The revised curriculum stressed the importance of ‘phonological awareness’ and set out a range of details under ‘phonic knowledge, focusing on the relationships between print symbols and sound patterns’. Similarly, in writing, there were greater details of purposes and audiences for writing, although still very few details of composing strategies in relation to content and discourse knowledge. Such contrasts with the first version of the national curriculum then raised the issue of how securely teachers were placed to teach the revised version.

National testing

The second centralising initiative was an annual programme of national testing for seven, eleven and fourteen year old pupils that began in 1991. Again, arrangements varied among the four countries and assumed a higher

profile in England because of the publication of league tables based on the performances of individual schools. The assessment system was originally based on discrete groups of specific criteria, which were equated to different levels of attainment, from level one (the lowest) to level eight, in a rather formulaeic way. Following the revision of the national curriculum in 1994-5, however, broad ‘level descriptions’ have been used, on a ‘best fit’ basis.[1]

There has also been a more subtle – some would say insidious – change. When the tests were first developed, the modal attainment for eleven year olds was level four. Since then, the government body delegated to oversee curriculum and assessment has equated level four with the notion of ‘national expectation’, as a part of a broader target-setting culture that central governments of both main political parties have adopted. The target-setting culture and its possibly distorting influence are discussed in more detail later. (For a historical review of national testing in the UK, see Shorrocks-Taylor, 1999).

The implications of the testing programme for assessment practices were all the stronger because national testing was centrally located at the heart of the education system, alongside curriculum content. Furthermore, while teacher assessments of student attainment have also been included in the testing programme, for reporting to parents and relaying to central government, differences between the two means of assessment remain problematic. Moreover, the high stakes culture created by the testing regime – centred on the school league tables – has represented a serious risk of distorting the teaching and learning potential of the national curriculum and, when it was eventually introduced, the NLS.

School inspections

The third centralising initiative is that, since 1992, the 19,000 publicly-funded English primary schools have also been subjected to a programme of school inspections every four years. The inspections are undertaken by specially

[1] Full details can be found at http://www.qca.org.uk.

trained inspectors, co-ordinated by the central government's Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) which was set up in that year. Inspections normally last a week and have normally covered the following : the standards achieved; teaching quality; curricular and extra-curricular activities; student care; partnership with parents and the school's leadership and management.

Before 1992, schools were inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), although the small size of the inspectorate (about 300) meant that individual schools were only fully inspected on an average of once every 30 years or so. The new national data-base of inspection evidence is now used to produce annual reviews and other subject-specific publications. Meanwhile, the size of HMI has been reduced to about half of what it was. Its new role includes monitoring the training of inspectors and school inspections and undertaking special investigations, for instance a longitudinal evaluation of the National Literacy Strategy (HMI, 1999, 2002).

There has again been the potential for the inspection programme – in conjunction with the testing regime – to distort the impact of one or more of the other strands of centralisation. An inspection of an individual school takes account of the school's national test results and draws on data that compare these results with those from schools with similar socio-economic catchments. The inspections can thus inadvertently distort schools' priorities and curriculum provision in ways that were not intended when the inspection programme was set up.

The National Literacy Strategy

The fourth centralising initiative was the National Literacy Strategy, although it lacked the statutory status of the other three. The Strategy was the result of the work of a Literacy Task Force that had been set up by the Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, in May 1996. The Task Force, led by Professor Michael Barber, from the University of London Institute of Education, published a preliminary consultation report in February 1997 and a final report in August 1997 (LTF, 1997a & b). In its second report the Task Force set out the details of a 'steady, consistent

strategy' for raising standards of literacy which could be sustained over a long period of time and be made a central priority for the education service as a whole.

The main aspects of the Strategy were as follows:

(i) An initial national target that, by 2002, 80% of 11 year olds should reach the standard 'expected' for their age in English (national curriculum level four). The proportion reaching this standard in 1996 was 57%. In the event, the target was reached in reading but not in writing. An even more ambitious target of 85% for 2007 is now in place.

(ii) *A Framework for Teaching*, an A4-sized ring binder (DfEE, 1998a) which sets out termly teaching objectives for the 5-11 age range, based on the national curriculum, and provides a practical structure of time and class management for a daily literacy hour.

(iii) A programme of professional development for all primary school teachers, centred on a *Literacy Training Pack* (DfEE, 1998b).

The *Framework* includes bullet point reminders that, as well as the literacy hour, additional time may also be needed for: reading to the class (e.g. in end of day sessions); pupils' own independent reading (for interest and pleasure) and extended writing (especially for older pupils). However, the relegation of these key issues to three bullet points in a substantial A4-sized ring binder ran the risk that their significance and implications would be overlooked or under-valued in schools.

During 1998, the government commissioned an independent review of the research and other related evidence that had influenced the National Literacy Strategy (Beard, 1999a). In a subsequent paper, the author of the review distinguishes between the 'predisposing' and the precipitating' influences (Beard, 2000a). The former could be taken as indicating that literacy teaching in England was in need of radical change: the teaching of early literacy had become largely individualised and appeared to be out of line with the practices suggested by school effectiveness research; the teaching of early reading often largely comprised hearing children read books in an order

suggested by commercial publishers; the teaching of writing relied heavily on de-contextualised exercises; accumulating inspection evidence suggested that there was often relatively little ‘teaching’ per se.

Furthermore, standards in literacy among English primary school children had appeared to remain largely stable between 1948 and 1996 (Brooks, 1998). Compared with other countries, English reading standards seemed similar to those in a ‘middle’ group of countries in performance tables. In the middle and upper parts of the range of scores, children from England performed as well as those in countries much higher in the rank order. However, England had a long ‘tail’ of under-achievement (Brooks et al., 1996). According to the Literacy Task Force, this long tail in particular, seemed to call for the kinds of direct, 'interactive' teaching approaches that had been used with ‘at risk’ pupils in the USA and Australia and which are discussed below (LTF, 1997a & b).

If these were the influences that 'predisposed' the Literacy Task Force towards the possible structure of a National Literacy Strategy, then the ‘precipitating’ influence was the early success of the National Literacy Project (NLP) that had been set up by the previous government in its final year of office. The NLP reflected many of the implications of the school effectiveness research and shared several of the priorities of the overseas literacy research with 'at risk' pupils.

The National Literacy Project

The National Literacy Project (NLP) had been set up in the Spring of 1996 in 18 parts of England (local education authorities). It had the following aims:

- to improve standards of literacy in participating primary schools in line with national expectations;
- to provide detailed support to schools and teachers through a structured programme and consultancy support;

- through the national network, to develop detailed, practical guidance on teaching methods and activities, and to disseminate these to the project schools;
- to disseminate the work of the NLP to other, non-participating LEAs and institutions;
- to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme.

Participating schools implemented two key structures, a *Framework for Teaching* and the literacy hour. These were earlier versions of what were subsequently to be included in the NLS. The *Framework* recommended the use of teaching methods that were new to the UK, particularly shared and guided reading and writing and also more systematic phonics (through the word level work, which also included spelling and vocabulary) than was common in school, according to inspection and research evidence.

The NLP was led by a senior member of Her Majesty's Inspectorate, John Stannard. He saw the the *Framework* as providing schools with a means of shifting the emphasis in planning for the revised National Curriculum for English (DfE, 1995) from 'what' to 'how'. This was done by using 'text, sentence and word level' provision to provide coverage, balance and progression in literacy teaching. However, he also saw the purpose of the *Framework for Teaching* as presenting teachers not with increased prescription but with a wide range of new and challenging decisions about tasks, activities and methods (Stannard, 1997). Nevertheless, the literacy hour represented a new level of prescription for primary school teachers.

The daily hour of time for dedicated literacy teaching was derived from the Final Report of the review of the national curriculum and its assessment by Sir Ron Dearing. Assuming a 36 week teaching year, to allow a margin for the induction of new pupils, assessment work, school events and educational visits (Dearing, 1994: 30), the Dearing Report recommended that 180 hours of English be taught directly for 5-7 year olds, an hour a day in the 36 weeks referred to above. A related recommendation was that another 36 hours were

to be taught through other subjects. For 7-11 year olds the figures were 162 and 18 respectively.

The literacy hour was central to the NLP and became equally central to the NLS. The recommended structure of the hour is as follows: approximately fifteen minutes of whole class 'text-level' work (shared reading or writing); approximately fifteen minutes of whole class 'word-level' work (vocabulary, phonics and spelling); approximately twenty minutes of differentiated group work; and a whole class plenary session.

The Literacy Task cite the literacy hour as representing some of the key factors that had been identified in school and classroom effectiveness research. School effectiveness is generally gauged by the further progress which pupils make than might be expected from consideration of the school's intake. The measures are normally in basic subjects, especially reading and numeracy, and examinations. The most valid research of this kind is longitudinal, so that cohorts can be followed over time. Leading researchers in the field stress that the outcomes from their work are not appropriate for the production of 'blue-print' schools (e.g. Mortimore, 1991; see also Mortimore et al., 1988).

A meta-analysis has identified two characteristics of school effectiveness which are found in multiple studies (Scheerens, 1992):

(i) structured teaching: including making clear what has to be learnt; dividing material into manageable units; teaching in a well-considered sequence; encouraging pupils to use hunches and prompts; regular testing for progress; immediate feedback.

(ii) effective learning time: Whole class teaching can often be superior to individualised teaching because, in the latter, the teacher has to divide attention and the net result per pupil is lower.

Similar factors are found in a meta-analysis of the effective classroom (Creemers, 1994; see also Reynolds, 1998 and Teddlie and Reynolds, 1999).

The NLS took up the implications of Scheerens' analysis in several ways. Firstly, it stressed the importance of direct teaching by the use of whole class teaching in the first half of the literacy hour and the maintenance of direct teaching with groups, and then with the class again, in the second half. Secondly, it maximised effective learning time by ensuring that there is a dedicated literacy hour during each school day, with further suggestions on providing for additional literacy learning time during the rest of the day (DfEE, 1998a: 4). Thirdly, it drew directly on the national curriculum in the content of the *Framework* and assisted the related 'opportunities to learn' by adopting a clear objectives-based approach for each primary school term.

A similar strategy, but especially to address the needs of disadvantaged pupils, was being implemented at the same time in Melbourne, Australia, in the Early Literacy Research Project (ELRP) led by Crévola and Hill (1998). These two researchers drew on evidence that schools only have a narrow 'window of opportunity' to make a difference in helping pupils with difficulties in literacy learning. Very little evidence existed at that time for the success of programmes designed to correct reading problems beyond the second year of schooling. However, they did draw upon a range of evidence (e.g. Wasik and Slavin, 1993) that dramatic improvements are achievable within the context of a fully implemented, comprehensive strategy that involves both system- and school-wide commitment and coordination. The eventual response of central government to the Task Force report indicated that the NLS was to be given system-wide support, including extra investment for the primary school sector (for an evaluative account, see Earl et al., 2003). The extent of 'school-wide' commitment depended in large part on how far schools adopted and understood the main elements of the NLS. Some incentives for this adoption were to be found in the evaluation of the NLP.

The evaluation of the National Literacy Project

The NLP was independently evaluated by the National Foundation for Educational Research using data from 250 schools. The test results revealed a significant and substantial improvement over the 18 month period. Final test scores had improved by approximately six standardised score points for 7-9 year olds and for 9-11 year olds, equivalent to 8 to 12 months progress over and above what is expected in these ages. Girls had higher average scores than boys and made more progress during the project. Children eligible for free school meals, those with special educational needs and those learning English as an additional language had lower scores, but all these groups also made statistically significant progress. All ethnic groups benefited equally (Sainsbury et al., 1998).

While the evaluation findings from the NLP were impressive, caveats need to be added: the schools where the NLP was implemented were generally in disadvantaged areas where there were arguably greater possibilities for improvement in educational attainment. In addition, the data on writing was far more limited and less holistic than the data on reading, being largely limited to accuracy.

In the light of the emerging success of the NLP, the Literacy Task Force took the decision to recommend the use of the literacy hour and a slightly amended form of the *Framework for Teaching* across the whole of England from 1998 onwards. The amendments to the NLP version were largely in objectives for writing, which included greater details of non-fiction genres, drawing on Australian genre theory. The LTF recommendation was that every primary school should adopt the *Framework* unless it could demonstrate through its action plan, schemes of work and test performances that its own approach was at least as effective as that of the use of the literacy hour (Literacy Task Force, 1997b). The NLS also included a range of other elements including a substantial professional development programme, based on five days work in each school, using a centrally provided package of textual and video materials. Over 300 'literacy consultants' (advisory teachers) were recruited, mostly from schools, to support implementation in the schools in their areas of England.

This immediate 'roll-out' was not viewed unequivocally by everyone concerned with the development of the NLP/NLS. John Stannard (1998) has indicated that he expected a 3-4 year extension of the NLP to different parts of England, according to preparedness. One of the Literacy Task Force members (Reynolds, 1998) published a paper to argue that, although the NLS appeared to have high validity, its implementation risked low reliability in such a sudden extension. The response of Michael Barber, who became Head of the new Standards and Effectiveness Unit in the incoming government of 1997, was that a 'learn as we go' approach would be taken and that extra resources would be devoted to dealing with weaknesses identified in implementation (Barber, 1999).

The short-term 'internal evaluation' of the NLS

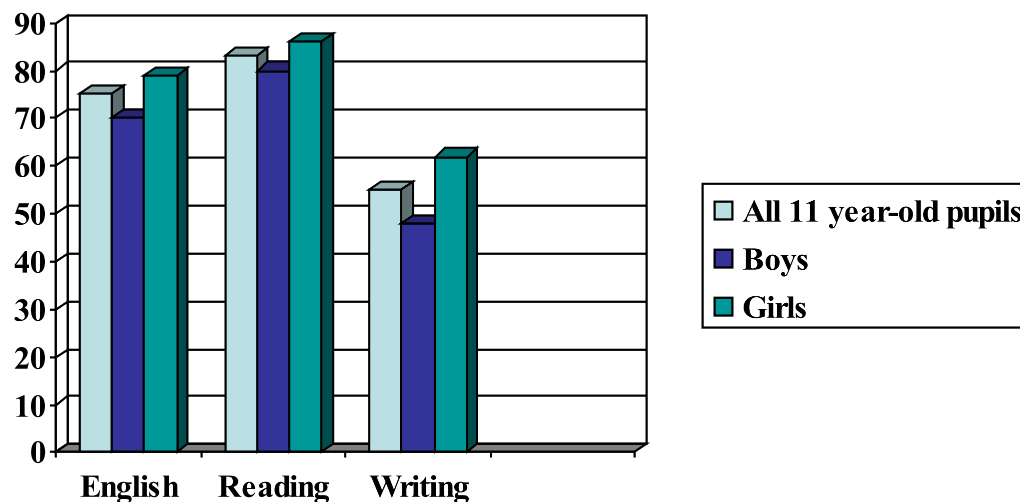
The NLS was ‘internally’ evaluated (i.e. from within the UK) by Her Majesty’s inspectorate, who surveyed practice in a national sample of 300 schools over a four year period and provided regular interim reports as well as a final one (HMI, 2002). The first interim publication reported that the literacy hour was adopted in virtually all 300 schools. Shared reading was apparently well understood and successfully introduced in most of these schools. The first interim evaluation also reported some recurrent weaknesses in less effective schools:

- the purposes of, and the teacher’s role in, guided reading were not always understood;
- in the teaching of the literacy hour, word level work, especially phonics, was not taught systematically or given the required emphasis;
- the headteacher’s leadership was sometimes unconvincing;
- there were sometimes substantial weaknesses in communication between the Project and individual schools, which hampered the support which could be given.

The major issue of writing

It was, however, the teaching of writing that caused greatest concern, so much so that, in 2000, HMI published a discussion paper that central government would be unlikely to achieve its 80% target because of the 'under-achievement' in writing and especially in boys. The paper was indicatively titled 'The Teaching of Writing in Primary Schools: Could do better'. The issue is well-illustrated in the 2000 national test results (see Fig. 1).

Fig 1 Percentage of pupils attaining Level 4 or above in 2000



HMI (2000) suggest that a number of factors may have contributed to the under-achievement, including the following:

- The legacy of reliance on de-contextualised exercises;
- Insufficient teaching of writing;
- Pupils practising writing rather than being taught how to improve it;
- A lack of balance between the teaching of writing and reading;
- Insufficient transfer of literacy learning into other subjects.

As was mentioned earlier, the problem may also be related to curriculum provision being insufficiently informed by psychological research findings on writing. The findings draw attention to the importance of content knowledge as well as purpose and audience and of the role of various facilitative procedures

to support composition. Without such provision, the teaching of writing may comprise little more than setting tasks and marking outcomes (Hillocks, 1986).

Central government responses to the evaluation findings

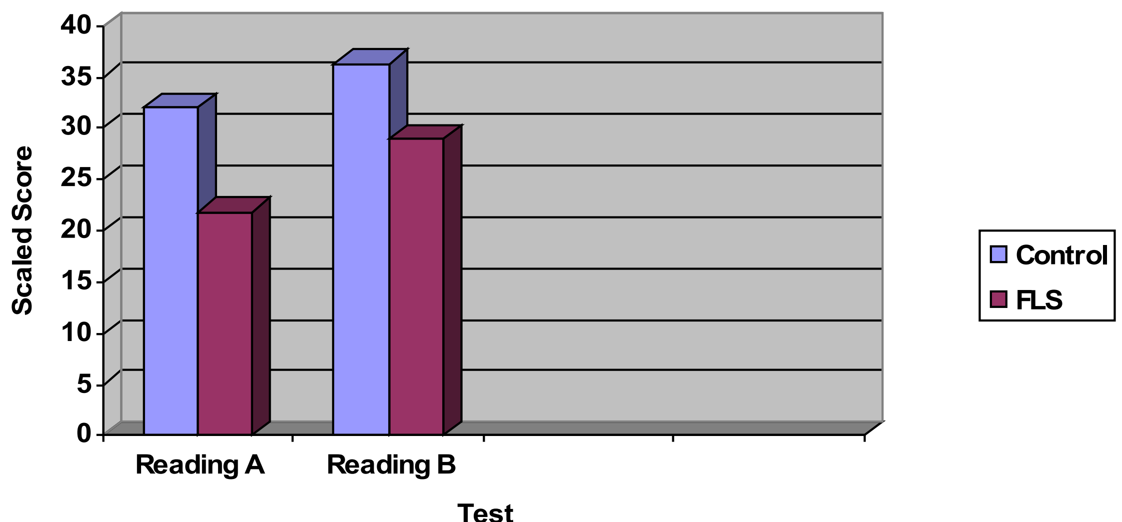
In line with the 'learn as we go' response to the implementation of the NLS, resources were devoted in 1999 to additional training in areas of provision where there were identified weaknesses. In particular, these comprised the following: 'Progression in Phonics', 'Developing Early Writing' (for 5-7 year olds), 'Grammar for Writing' (for 7-11 year olds) and assistance for 5-6 and 7-8 year old pupils who need additional support in literacy learning. None of these were specifically evaluated and it is difficult to gauge their success. One exception to this was provision of materials and approaches to assist 9-10 year old pupils who need additional support in literacy learning, the *Further Literacy Support* (FLS) programme, which was introduced in 2003. Its main features include the following:

- An intervention programme to assist 9-10 year olds whose attainment is below the national standard (but who do not have ‘special needs’)
- These children are likely to struggle in accessing the secondary school curriculum.
- 12 weeks of additional support in Term 2 (spring) for approximately 20% of an average class (about six children).
- The children are taught in withdrawal groups by a teaching assistant, using scripted materials

The effectiveness of this 'supplemental' programme was investigated through an externally commissioned, independent national evaluation study, using standardised tests and teacher assessments of children's attainment (Beard et al., 2004). The literature suggests that little research has been done on the effectiveness of supplemental programmes for this age-range (McIntyre et al., 2005). Test scores and teacher assessments from the national evaluation of FLS indicated short-term catch-up in reading by the target group and subsequent sustained movement similar to other 9-10 year-old pupils over two terms. Similar, but not statistically significant, catch-up was found in writing.

The figure below shows the reading scores of 1300 children before and after FLS, using the *Literacy Impact* test (Twist & Brill, 2000), specially designed for interventions of this kind, as compared with a control group of 120 children from across the full attainment range in five schools from a broad range of socio-economic status catchments.

Fig 2 Mean reading test scores for the FLS and Control Groups before and after FLS



National test data, from a year after the programme ended, indicate that over 90% of the target children did meet or exceed 'national expectations' in reading at age 11 and 84% in English overall. As bringing children up to age-related attainment at age 11 is the primary purpose of the FLS programme, these data are an important measure of its success.

The longer-term 'internal evaluation' of the NLS

HMI concluded its four-year evaluation of the NLS in 2002. The final report included the following conclusions. There had been clear improvements in teaching in the 300 schools, the *Framework for Teaching* having given greater

focus to literacy teaching. There had been increases in direct teaching, a clearer structure, higher expectations of pupils and greater progression and continuity.

There were also continuing concerns, again reflecting what Reynolds (1998) had prophetically called 'unreliable implementation':

- The teaching of phonics was still insufficiently systematic;
- Guided reading was still not well taught in many schools;
- Day-to-day assessment was not being sufficiently linked to progress;
- The NLS was insufficiently embedded in National Curriculum;
- Headteachers were not always providing appropriate leadership and management and this was weak in 10% of schools.

Overall, however, HMI suggest that teachers now needed to develop a more questioning and reflective approach to the next stage of implementation. Similar conclusions can be found in the 'external evaluation' of the NLS.

The 'external evaluation' of the NLS

In parallel with the HMI evaluation, central government commissioned an external evaluation (i.e. from outside the UK) of the NLS, and its companion National Numeracy Strategy, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). Again, there were interim reports in line with the 'learn as we go' approach. The final report records the following successes in the NLS (Earl et al., 2003):

- The breadth of influence of the NLS on teaching and learning
- Its adaptation within a coherent vision (as shown in 'Progression in Phonics'; 'Developing Early Writing'; 'Grammar for Writing'; 'Additional/Early/Further Literacy Support')
- Its value for money
- Its policy coherence over time
- The balance of ‘pressure and support’

The final point is of particular interest. It suggests that one possible distortion created by the inspection and testing programme on what schools do has at been at least partly exonerated, in the eyes of the external evaluators, in promoting educational change. The OISE evaluation also raises some

questions and challenges for the NLS which are discussed in the section below on 'lessons for other large-scale reform'.

A consequent increase in England's international league table position?

The NLS received a fillip in 2003 when evidence was reported that England has apparently risen in the international league tables of reading literacy. In the mid-1990s, the performance of England's nine-year-olds was around the international average (Brooks et al., 1996). By 2001, England was ranked third in a study of the reading achievement of ten-year-old pupils in 35 countries (Twist et al., 2003).

At the same time, there appear to be some continuing issues in England's international profile of literacy attainment. Pupil performance in reading for literary purposes remains higher than in reading for informational purposes. Girls continue to perform better than boys (as they do in all countries participating in the 2001 research), although gender differences in England are smaller for better readers and also smaller for all English pupils in reading for informational purposes. English children's attitudes to reading compare less favourably in international comparisons: in England, 44% expressed highly positive attitudes to reading and 13% predominantly negative attitudes, compared with the international averages of 51% and 6% respectively. Leisure reading seems to have greater competition from other pursuits in England, as ten-year-old children tend to play computer games more frequently than their international peers and also watch television more frequently and for longer. Whether this reflects the 'reduced status' of reading to the class and of encouraging children's independent reading, each of which were only featured in single bullet points in the NLS *Framework*, is a matter for discussion and further enquiry.

Any success in raising reading standards, as defined by national test criteria, will reflect the sustained hard work by thousands of teachers and children. With reference to the NLS, such an increase also needs to be weighed against a substantial increase in central government investment in primary education: in training materials; in-service programmes; and the appointment

of several hundred literacy consultants. Complex questions also remain about the extent of schools' fidelity in implementing the recommended practices, whether its effectiveness has been compromised by local factors and whether it can sustain the changes in practice that it has promoted (Earl et al., 2003).

The fact that the overall outcomes from the NLS have been generally perceived as positive by policy-makers led to the NLS being extended into the first three years of secondary schools in 2001. Again the government commissioned an independent review of the relevant research and other related evidence (Harrison, 2002). This extension indicates that the pace of change in the English education system shows no sign of slowing. More recently the NLS and its companion National Numeracy Strategy have been brought together as part of a broader National Primary Strategy, with encouragement for teachers to maintain a broader curriculum and to give greater attention to creativity, assessment for learning, and health and physical education. Additional guidance has also been provided for speaking and listening, after a number of critiques of the relative neglect of 'oracy' in the NLS. The teaching of writing continues to be the focus of intense discussion and review (e.g. Beard, 2005). The teaching of phonics has been the focus of a national enquiry, with schools being asked to introduce greater synthetic phonics (phonemic blending) from September 2006 (Rose, 2006). The *Framework for Teaching* is being re-written with greater details on synthetic phonics but with less prescribed detail overall. Since 2005, the inspection of schools has been relaxed in one way, in that inspections for unproblematic schools are now shorter and more self-evaluative. However, inspections are now more pressured in another way, in that schools now have a few days' (as opposed to several weeks') warning of a forthcoming inspection and may exist in a state of nervous apprehension. In all this, there has been a curious lack of alternative models from teachers, teacher educators or researchers of how the literacy curriculum might be taught.

Towards 'Informed professionalism'?

In fact, taking stock of the NLS raises the question of how far the Strategy does represent the policy application of several complementary areas of

educational research (Beard, 2000b; Wyse, 2003; Beard, 2003). The possibility that research has been judiciously applied in ways that have bolstered national attainment – mediated by the promotion of more productive pedagogical approaches – is of particular interest, coming as it does soon after a time when educational research in the UK has been subjected to substantial criticisms (e.g. Hargreaves, 1996; Tooley and Darby, 1998; Woodhead, 1998).

In a retrospective paper Michael Barber has tried to contextualise the NLS by locating it within what he argues are four stages of development in the interface of research, policy and practice:

Uninformed professionalism – the period prior to the 1980s, often regarded as the golden age of teacher autonomy but when, according to Barber, teachers lacked appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes for a modern society;

Uninformed prescription – the period following the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979 and, in particular, its imposition of a National Curriculum in 1988 for political rather than educational reasons;

Informed prescription – the period following the election of Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1997, bringing with it (in Barber's view) 'evidence-based' policies such as the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (and Standards-based teacher training, which has not been discussed in this paper);

Informed professionalism – a new phase, just beginning, when teachers will have appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes so that the government can grant them a greater degree of licensed autonomy to manage their own affairs (from Whitty, 2006, p.2).

Some lessons from the NLS for other large-scale reform

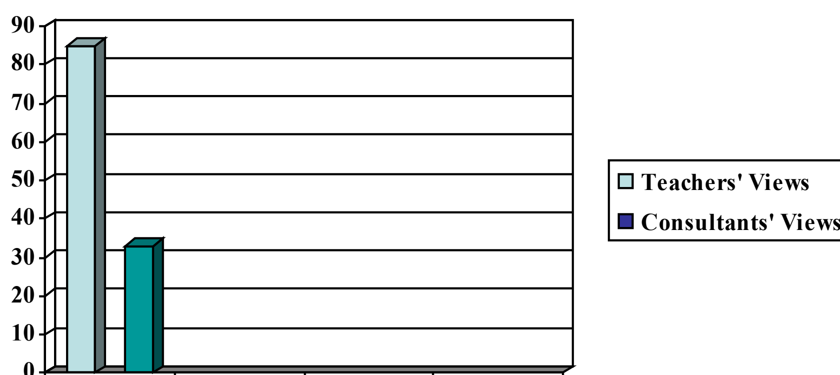
By way of conclusion, it may be helpful to consider the questions and challenges of the NLS/NNS that are raised by the OISE evaluation report.

These issues may be of assistance in considering the implications for programmes of educational change in other parts of the world.

Build deep teacher understanding

The OISE study highlights the fundamental issue of teacher subject knowledge in major educational programmes of this kind. For instance, the NLS consultants were asked to rate how far teachers have the subject knowledge needed to implement the Strategy well and teachers were asked the same question. The results are shown in Fig 3.

Fig 3 Teachers' and consultants' views on whether teachers 'have the subject knowledge needed to implement the Strategy well'



The Ontario report notes that this finding raises a key issue in the professional development of teachers, and in learning theory as a whole, that can be traced back to Socrates: of teachers 'not knowing what they do not know'. As has been indicated earlier, for historical reasons in England there were key areas where the subject knowledge of teachers appeared insecure at the time when the NLS was implemented, especially in the teaching of phonics and writing. Future strategies of this kind are likely to benefit from the strategic planning of professional capacity-building in the context of existing practice.

Deflect attention from preoccupation with single achievement scores

This area seems to have been one of the most evident examples of unintended consequences of the target-setting component of the NLS. The OISE evaluation argues that teachers' preoccupations with single

achievement scores has risked undermining the more positive aspects of teaching and learning that are embraced in the Strategy. It is difficult to see how this issue can be resolved while the publication of school league tables continues on an annual basis. This practice has been abandoned in Northern Ireland and has never been implemented in Wales or Scotland. This is not to deny the value of a school's attainment profile being provided for parents or the general public. Schools are already obliged to include their national test results in the prospectus which they are legally obliged to provide, while also including additional information about what they see as their other qualities and distinctive provisions. The league tables lack this kind of additional information and represent an unfortunate kind of reductionism that curriculum programmes in other parts of the world may choose to eschew.

Consider how the strategy can be sustained

The indications are that there was large-scale adoption of the literacy hour and general compliance with the Strategy, even though it lacked the statutory status of the national curriculum content, national testing and school inspections. The OISE evaluation report argues that this degree of compliance may in turn result in a culture of dependence and a lack of awareness of how educational provision can improve further. The implications may be that sustaining a strategy of this scale needs to evolve through the development of a greater sense of adaptation and ownership in schools while maintaining adherence to the key teaching and learning principles that are involved.

Develop greater ‘assessment literacy’ in schools

The OISE report suggests that one of the key elements in developing this sense of ownership is greater use of 'assessment literacy' in schools. A preoccupation with the test-related performances that are associated with national strategies can be more positively directed than is sometimes the case. This positive direction includes greater use of test and assessment data for *formative* purposes: in specifying and critically analysing what children need to learn *next*, rather than just in recording what children have achieved. Greater assessment literacy is likely in turn to contribute to the professional

capacity-building referred to above, in relation to more general understanding about the teaching and learning of literacy.

Extend the strategy to parents, families and the public

Another unanticipated outcome from 'high-stakes' and high-profile school-based national initiatives is that they deflect attention from families and communities, whose culture and child-care practices also contribute significantly to children's attainment. The NLS did include some awareness-raising elements in its first year, including a media campaign and a series of events in a 'National Year of Reading' (1998-9), summer literacy schools and a range of recommendations for other agencies and institutions. In the views of the OISE evaluators, there remains a continuing challenge for policy makers, to avoid the defeatist myth that schools make *no* difference, without bouncing to the other extreme that they make *all* the difference. How to build on initiatives like the NLS, to develop productive and sustainable educational collaborations with home and communities, remains a major issue.

Conclusion

The OISE evaluation report judges that the NLS was 'well-grounded in research (at least compared with most other change efforts)' (Earl et al., 2003:140). As well as the work of the Literacy Task Force and the commissioned reviews of research, evaluation and inspection evidence have played key roles in the 'learn as we go' approach to implementation and subsequent modifications. This accumulating research base has informed the allocation of additional resources and judgements about their effectiveness.

The research base appeared to provide substantial evidence to support the case for raising literacy standards in the United Kingdom and for modifying the ways in which reading and writing were taught in many primary schools. Taking stock of the successes and failures of the NLS needs to be contextualised within the evolving dynamics between research, policy and practice and, in particular, how the congruences were exploited and the tensions confronted.

Large-scale educational reform invariably creates debate: opinions proliferate; attitudes entrench. Universities have a crucial role to play in lifting these debates above a mere exchange of situated viewpoints by providing validly conceptualised, reliably collected and rigorously analysed research evidence. In this way, universities can help society to achieve what the ancient Greeks saw as an important part of a civilised society: 'to know thyself'. If research evidence is critically considered and the implications sensitively implemented, then it can make a central contribution to significantly raising educational standards and, indirectly, to improving the life-chances of thousands of children.

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