

SUMMARY

Background

Governments of all political persuasions in countries around the world are showing strong concerns about the so-called 'basics' in education. They are concerned about how poor standards in numeracy and literacy are costly in terms of lost wealth-creation opportunities as well as being a drain on society's resources in terms of the cost of social problems associated with academic failure. The numeracy and literacy levels of young people are of vital importance in influencing later academic, social and economic outcomes. These concerns have prompted a range of government initiatives to improve standards in schools. The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) implemented across schools in England can be seen as such an initiative; it reflects the government's concern to develop 'what works' approaches to raising standards of literacy and a growing need to understand more fully the distinctive characteristics and classroom practices that can be regarded as effective.

Although there has been an interest in 'effective schools' and 'effective teaching' for decades now, it is only recently that there has been a specific focus on literacy and especially on those characteristics and practices of teachers who appear to be successful in their teaching of literacy. We know a great deal about how children acquire literacy and develop as readers and writers, but we are only just beginning to understand more fully the ways and means through which successful teachers promote healthy literacy growth amongst their students. Many curriculum approaches and packages have been found both to work and to fail; what seems critical is the skills of the teacher. We need to know more about how to recognise 'effective' teachers of literacy and to understand more fully the kinds of professional knowledge, beliefs and classroom actions that are associated with the successful teaching of literacy. It is a recognition of such needs that has prompted this review. What we mean by 'effective' literacy teaching is not straightforward and for this reason we sometimes place the word in inverted commas to demonstrate our recognition of this. However, we have not done this throughout the text since we also use the synonyms 'successful', 'exemplary' and so on, in line with the literature.

The better that we can understand the nature of the expertise of successful teachers of literacy the more likely are we to be able to plan and implement courses for the initial, as well as in-service training of our literacy teachers.

Aims and review question

The central aim of the review was as follows:

- to assemble, examine, appraise and synthesise the evidence on the nature of effective literacy teaching of students in the 4 to 14 age range of mainstream schooling

This necessitated our focus on the main question for the review:

- What are the professional characteristics, beliefs and classroom approaches of teachers of literacy in the 4 to 14 age range of mainstream schooling who have been nominated as effective?

Embedded in our search question was a concern to know more about how successful literacy teachers are recognised, what their classroom practices are like, and what professional knowledge and beliefs about literacy, learning and learners they bring to their classroom teaching.

Methods

To answer our research question, we initially drew up a protocol or plan in which we set out our main strategies for finding studies from our literature search and the methods which we would employ for screening these studies to ascertain their inclusion in, or exclusion from, our review. We searched three major databases, handsearched key journals and scrutinised websites. Using a set of explicit criteria, the titles and abstracts of the relevant studies were screened and the studies that met the criteria set out in the protocol were identified. These studies were then keyworded, or indexed, using the EPPI keywording sheet with some review specific keywords added. A 'mapping exercise' was conducted on the studies which met our selection criteria and a descriptive map helped us to identify and describe the studies and build up an overall picture of the field. It also enabled us to identify a subset of studies which we would examine in an in-depth review. The 12 studies which were data-extracted and analysed were those deemed to be of most direct relevance to the Teacher Training Agency (TTA).

The in-depth analysis of these studies involved two stages. In the first stage each study was analysed carefully in terms of its contribution to answering the review question. This involved data-extraction by one reviewer using EPPI procedures. It also involved a modified version of data-extraction by another, independent reviewer using a proforma designed to describe each study under the following headings:

- bibliographical details
- focus
- aims
- design
- main findings
- conclusions
- generalisability
- trustworthiness

The individual studies were given a HIGH, MEDIUM or LOW weight of evidence score according to the extent to which they were judged to contribute to answering the research question. In the second stage, three of these 12 studies were further analysed, adhering fully to the quality assurance procedures recommended by EPPI.

Results

Searches of three major databases together with a small amount of handsearching of journals and scrutiny of websites took place and 1,276 studies published in English after 1988 were identified as being of possible relevance to the review. Eighty studies satisfied the criteria for inclusion in the 'map' and a number of interesting patterns were detected amongst these studies. The bulk (79%) of the studies were of American origin with only about one-fifth from the United Kingdom. Whilst almost half of the studies were concerned with general literacy teaching, and one-quarter focused on the teaching of reading, fewer than 10 percent were about the teaching of writing. The greater number of the studies was based upon the primary school years with only about one-quarter focusing on the middle and secondary school years. The research studies examined seem to suggest that by far the most popular and useful way to find out about effective literacy teaching is to observe teachers nominated as effective teachers and to interview them about their teaching.

The synthesis of the 12 studies in the in-depth review showed that effective teachers of literacy have a wide and varied repertoire of teaching practices and approaches (e.g. scaffolding, where support in learning is initially provided by the teacher and then gradually withdrawn as the pupil gains in confidence) integrating reading with writing, differentiated instruction, excellent classroom management skills) and they can intelligently and skilfully blend them together in different combinations according to the needs of individual pupils. Effective literacy teachers are especially alert to children's progress and can step in and utilise the appropriate method or practice to meet the child's instructional needs. The 'effective' teacher of literacy uses an unashamedly eclectic collection of methods which represents a balance between the direct teaching of skills and more holistic approaches. This means that they balance direct skills teaching with more authentic, contextually-grounded literacy activities. They avoid the partisan adherence to any *one* sure-fire approach or method.

The synthesis of the three studies (in which teacher effectiveness was empirically demonstrated) that underwent the second and more rigorous stage of in-depth reviewing suggests the actions that teachers can take to promote literacy development in the early years of school. These are as follows:

- **balance** (direct skills instruction and more contextually-grounded literacy activities)
- **integration** (integrating literacy modes, and linking with other curricular areas)
- **pupil engagement, on-task behaviour and pupil self-regulation**
- **teaching style involving differentiated instruction** (incorporating extensive use of scaffolding and coaching and careful and frequent monitoring of pupil progress)
- **links with parents and local community**

Conclusions

The in-depth analysis of all 12 studies suggests that it is possible to identify the effective teacher of literacy and to delineate a wide variety of components which appear to be collectively associated with successful teaching of literacy. The existing evidential base is limited, however, by the fact that most research studies did not empirically verify the nominations of effectiveness, relying instead on the nominations of others. Also, it is limited by the scale of evidence pertaining to the UK. The majority of studies are US-based (North American) and the recommendations that follow have therefore to be considered in the light of the fact that all education systems are contextually bound and what applies in one may not necessarily be found in another.

Implications

Implications for policy

- (a) It is important that teacher educators, student teachers and teachers as well as literacy advisers, consultants and OfSTED inspectors (in the UK) are aware of the existing evidence about effective literacy teaching. We suggest that these groups should be made aware of the strength of the evidence supporting the findings for the early years and that these findings should influence their practice.
- (b) The research reveals that differentiation (where the teacher uses appropriate teaching strategies, methods and resources for teaching a diversity of learners) is clearly a crucial aspect of effective teaching and will need to become much more common in our increasingly diverse classrooms. Our national concern for inclusion means that greater numbers of students, who might have attended special schools in the recent past, are now taught in mainstream schools, thus emphasising the significance of this issue.
- (c) Policy-makers should consider the importance of the following in literacy development: the early years as a key time for literacy learning; differentiated instruction; authentic opportunities for reading, writing and talk; cross-curricular connections; and careful monitoring of pupils' literacy learning by teachers.

Implications for practice

There simply is no *one* single critical variable that defines outstanding literacy instruction. According to the research evidence, however, there is a cluster of beliefs and practices like scaffolding, the encouragement of self-regulation, high teacher expectations, and expert classroom management. Students in training will not only need to be exposed to this wide and varied array of teaching practices but will also need experience in blending these practices in different ways for different children. They will also need opportunities to reflect on their own and others' practice in the light of the research base. Case study and exemplification material would be useful supports for teacher educators in promoting this learning and reflection.

Implications for further research

- (a) The majority of the current research studies originate from the US. We need more high quality research about the work of effective teachers of literacy in UK schools.
- (b) Future research would benefit from a close focus on effectiveness in literacy teaching with reference to a range of student outcomes (and not just test scores).
- (c) Research in the UK might examine more closely the links between effectiveness at the whole school level and the ways in which effectiveness at this level can promote and support effective literacy teaching within individual classrooms.
- (d) Writing is more in need of further study than reading, at all phases, but especially in the primary and middle years.
- (e) Further systematic in-depth analysis of the 80 studies noted above, and more immediately, of the nine which have not been through the full EPPI quality-assurance system, is necessary in order to progress our understanding of effective literacy teaching.