

## *LIFELONG LEARNING: IN, OUT AND BEYOND WORK*

### *NIACE inquiry into adult and youth literacy in England*

Literacy in schools: a teacher's perspective on working with students with least developed literacy skills.

#### Introduction

This paper discusses the potential of schools to develop young people's literacy across the 14-19 age-range, in particular young people in their final years of schooling who have not yet acquired the understanding, knowledge or skills to turn literacy to their advantage. Amongst these young people will be most of those who by the end of Year 9 are still working below National Curriculum Level 5 (21%)<sup>1</sup> or by the end of Year 11 have been awarded an ungraded for their GCSE English<sup>2</sup> (1.4%)<sup>3</sup>. The emphasis of the paper will be on teaching and learning in school, especially the part played by good classroom teachers in students' literacy achievements. Classroom teachers do not act in isolation: their work is contingent on students' prior experience of literacy; support from families and carers; professionals such as learning support assistants, special educational needs co-ordinators and form tutors. Nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> DfE Statistical First Release

<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000949/sfr23-2010.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Here and below, only one of the exam boards offering GCSE English, Entry Level Certificate in English and Functional Skills has been hyperlinked for illustrative purposes; any of the others would have been equally appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> Joint Council for Qualifications

<http://www.jcq.org.uk/attachments/published/1320/Appendix - GCSE~AppGCSE Tables.pdf>

good classroom teachers arguably remain one of the most potent influences on young people's literacy development. This paper, therefore, begins with some suggestions as to what might be deemed good classroom teaching in general and good literacy teaching in particular as a basis for further discussion. It then considers briefly some of the challenges for literacy development for 14-19 students in schools and what works or does not work to support them. It concludes with priorities for future action.

## Good classroom teaching

There are various views about what constitutes good classroom teaching e.g. the Training and Development Agency's Professional Standards for teachers; Ofsted's Generic grade descriptors and supplementary subject-specific guidance; higher education criteria for the award of the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or the Postgraduate Certificate of Professional Study (PCPS); findings from research projects such as *Effective Teachers of Literacy* (Medwell *et al.*, 2002). Good classroom teaching is also exemplified through the work of subject associations like UKLA whose research, publications, conferences and contributions to policy-making bring together best practice of a wide range of professionals: subject specialist teachers, local authority advisors, librarians, teacher educators, researchers and consultants. Despite some variation in the above organisations' perspectives, there is probably broad agreement about certain key characteristics of good classroom teaching, such as those which now follow:

- Good classroom teachers have high quality subject knowledge with a clear appreciation of related concepts and constructs, enabling them to interpret the curriculum and plan for learning intelligently. It enables them to devise imaginative classroom activities, differentiate material creatively and engage students systematically in learning. They proceed with a good 'conceptual map' of the territory (Alexander, 2008, p. 31), encouraging students to be increasingly independent.

- Good classroom teachers expect students to share responsibility for the future direction of their learning. They encourage students to learn from feedback which is genuinely formative i.e. they have a clear idea about what comprises quality in students' work (Marshall, 2002), articulating its strengths and explaining how it can be further developed. Their planning acknowledges students' perspectives and they seek to generate authentic classroom talk i.e. discussion from which both students and teachers learn rather than exchanges in which students reiterate what the teacher already knows (Nystrand, 1997; Nystrand, 2006; Mercer and Littleton, 2007; Alexander, 2008). They draw on students' *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005) to make productive connections between home and school learning. They also recognise that their *own* funds of knowledge – the understanding and practice they bring to their teaching as professional subject specialists – are vital to help students learn what they do not already know.
- Good classroom teachers are always learning (Cremin *et al.*, 2009). They are interested in theories of teaching and learning which underpin their practice, enabling them to make informed decisions about students' needs and achievements (O'Sullivan and McGonigle, 2010). They understand the synergy between teaching and research, adopting an enquiry-based stance towards their work (Barker, 2003). As *teachers* they plan and teach innovatively; as *researchers* they explore whether and how their approaches lead to effective student learning. In a recent publication based on a professional development course, the authors consider the potential of this synergy:

One of the most important things we learnt from the course was about innovation itself. Although much of the teaching we shared with one another was colourful and eye-catching, that was not what made it innovative. Rather, the innovation operated at a deeper, more complex level: the level of thinking... What did that mean in practice? First and foremost, for this group of teachers, it meant thinking differently about students, trying to see what learning in English might look like from their perspective and developing the planning from there, rather than starting with discrete, prescriptive objectives

and squeezing components of English into them. Several teachers deliberately undertook their project with classes who challenged them most. The research, albeit very small-scale, led them to take up reflective positions which enabled them to plan for students as if through their eyes. The effect seemed to be that the students were more inclined to position themselves as engaged learners rather than, say, as disaffected boys or low-achieving girls (Cliff Hodges, Binney and Evans, 2010, p. 4).

If good classroom teaching, as described above, leads teachers to adopt innovative approaches with their most challenging classes and view students from different perspectives as a result, the point provides an important basis from which to discuss what kind of provision might be best for 14-19 year-olds with the least developed literacy skills.

## Features of good literacy teaching

Having focused above on good classroom teaching I now discuss factors involved specifically in good teaching of literacy (Wyatt-Smith and Gunn, 2007). Good teachers do not unthinkingly adopt particular ways to teach literacy; nor, usually, do they rely on a single approach. Instead, they question different paradigms, working out (e.g. through reading, discussion with others, research and collaborative planning) what and how to teach in ways that best suits the needs of their students. Good teachers adopt nuanced approaches to literacy teaching, shuttling back and forth between them (e.g. those identified by Wyatt-Smith and Gunn: skill-based or whole-language; print-based or multiliteracies; cultural heritage or critical literacy).

However, such teachers not only pay close attention to students' literacy but also, simultaneously, to subject or disciplinary learning (Freebody, Maton and Martin, 2008). In other words, their teaching rests on the premise that students are not just in the classroom to *learn* but to learn *something*. Whilst learning to learn is important and has strong transferable potential (Claxton and Lucas, 2009), students must also feel they are learning things that are immediately and intrinsically interesting. Crucially, students need to be absolutely clear about the relationship between literacy and subject or disciplinary learning:

Without such an understanding of what is involved in disciplinary literacy, students will be offered only a series of discrete skills or ideas rather than the basis for building their understandings over time – nice bricks, no plans (Freebody, Maton and Martin, 2008, p. 193).

Good literacy teaching therefore aims to arouse students' curiosity not just about conventions of literacy *per se*, but about how literacy can be put to work in different contexts for different audiences and purposes to create particular effects. It assumes students are both readers and producers of texts, who, through practising literacy, learn what reading and writing can be good *for*.

## What are the key challenges/issues for young people 14-19 with the least developed literacy skills in schools?

During their final years in school, students with low levels of achievement in literacy may well have poor self-esteem, experience barriers in all areas of the curriculum, be excluded from many examination classes and inhibited in work experience placements. Limited prospects beyond schooling further decrease their motivation. In schools where the emphasis is on students gaining A\*-C grades at GCSE, the impact on students who do not is likely to be negative, especially if such students are also perceived as problematic and schools seek quick fixes rather than longer-term, sustainable solutions in response.

## What works in supporting literacy skills development of these young people? What evidence is there?

Despite challenges faced by low-achieving students, it is extremely important to bear in mind that there is seldom anything inherently preventing them from further developing their understanding, knowledge and skills in literacy. For example, as data from the latest PISA report show, if students *are* engaged and *do* have a positive attitude towards reading, socio-economic disadvantage need not be an issue:

Some 15-year-olds who come from the most socio-economically disadvantaged homes, but who are highly engaged in reading and who approach learning positively, achieve higher reading scores than students who come from highly or moderately privileged families but who are poorly engaged in reading and do not approach their learning effectively (OECD, 2010, p. 91).

Neither is gender necessarily a barrier to developing literacy skills:

... differences within genders are far greater than those between the genders. Moreover, the size of the gender gap varies considerably across countries, suggesting that boys and girls do not have inherently different interests and academic strengths, but that these are mostly acquired and socially induced (*ibid.* p. 99).

Schools and teachers therefore need to retain open-minded attitudes and not impose false ceilings on attainment. But they also need to develop inclusive practices so that all students have the chance to learn within a rich and diverse curriculum using a wide range of resources and technologies. For example, a recent Becta research report, *An exploration of digital creativity used to engage and motivate 'hard-to-reach' learners in behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) schools*, found there were benefits for students who otherwise found school work difficult in using a variety of ICT to create moving image sequences, stop-frame animation and podcasts to learn about conventional aspects of the curriculum such as phonics (Russell and McGuigan, 2007).

It might be helpful at this point to consider briefly how teachers can support young people whose literacy skills are least developed when they are faced with a significant challenge, for example studying a Shakespeare play. A great deal of work over the last two or three decades by organisations such as the Shakespeare in Schools project (Gibson, 1998) has illuminated possibilities for truly inclusive practice. Some teachers might balk at the prospect of teaching a Shakespeare play to any but the highest achieving students. However, good teachers are likely to enjoy exploring ways to help all students to gain access to the play, even when working within a special school (Fifield, 1999), seeing the potential for developing literacy at the same

time as learning about key aspects of the discipline (English literature, playwriting, theatre, performance, figurative language, poetry). Furthermore, students learn through the study of literature about life, reading, the arts, and much else besides, about what literacy can be for. It leads them beyond the vocational while potentially supporting them in that area as well<sup>4</sup>. These teachers help their students understand how ideas are represented in dramatic form. They encourage close study of words and phrases to decide how they might be acted out. They draw students' attention to the rhythms and structures of the play as a whole, emphasising it as a script for performance and considering different performed versions (including the students' own classroom performances) in various media e.g. film, animation, theatrical. Because such approaches are multifaceted, students have different opportunities to engage with language and ideas. Even if some do not work, others may. Evidence of their effectiveness is available in accounts of classroom-based practice and research (Yandell, 2008), although that effectiveness may be curtailed if the work is linked with narrowly-conceived test preparation (Coles, 2003; Coles, 2009). Low achieving students, like anyone else, need qualifications for employment, personal satisfaction and well-being. Where GCSEs are not deemed to be achievable, the Entry Level Certificate in English (a *subject-specific* qualification as distinct from the *generic* Functional Skills) may be relevant, potentially offering a nourishing and sustaining curriculum which requires reading, writing, speaking and listening related to drama and could therefore, if teachers thought it pertinent, include study of a Shakespeare play.

Classroom work such as that outlined above offers low achieving students a chance to engage successfully with rich and rewarding literature. Research stresses the benefits of engaged reading of literary texts, especially the very particular processes afforded by narrative (Harding, 1962/1977; Lunzer and Gardner, 1979; Meek, 1983; Scholes, 1985; Bruner, 1986; Meek, 1988; Cox, 1998; Scholes, 1998; Hall and Coles, 1999; Barrs and Cork, 2001; Pennac, 2004; Miall, 2006; Cremin *et al.*, 2009; OECD, 2010). Arguably, therefore, literacy curricula which include literature are doing an invaluable service to these young people. However,

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<sup>4</sup> On a visit by PGCE students to a local airport to explore literacy in the workplace, the group were told by the company's personnel officer about the high value placed by employers on drama in the school curriculum. Benefits included students developing the ability to work collaboratively, viewing ideas from different perspectives, and communicating with others clearly and responsively.

students need to be able to develop as independent readers as well and schemes such as Quick Reads or publishers like Barrington Stoke offer powerful, tangible encouragement.

Beyond the curriculum, many schools offer support which complements mainstream work. Here, schemes such as the Arsenal Double Club act as literacy *enrichment* because there is already a secure literacy curriculum to enrich and in which to embed systematically and coherently further purposeful activity.

## What doesn't work? Evidence?

There is evidence that literacy teaching which is unsystematic, poorly understood, undifferentiated or narrowly conceived does not work for anyone, not just those who find it difficult. 14-19 year-olds do not like being taught literacy in ways that ignore their maturity, needs and interests. Approaches which they perceive to be too similar to how they were taught in primary school are unlikely to work effectively. The authors of the research report, *Improving the literacy and numeracy of young people in custody and in the community*, found that:

Literacy and numeracy provision observed was predominantly decontextualised and involved individual work using worksheets. Whilst some students were observed to work diligently in these discrete basic skills sessions, a lot of restlessness, task avoidance, resentment and frustration was also apparent (Hurry *et al*, 2010, p.6).

However, the authors go on to make a point which returns us to the starting point of this paper: good teachers are crucial to the process of young people developing their literacy learning in schools:

Where literacy or numeracy were taught making use of meaningful contexts or games, students were much more engaged and spent longer periods working. It is difficult to disentangle the

curriculum from teaching methods here as contextualised learning also tended to involve group discussions and participatory learning (*ibid.*)

From the Ofsted annual report 2009/10 comes further evidence of what does not work, for example attempts to integrate functional skills into Diplomas where:

... links between the functional skills taught in stand-alone lessons and the principal learning in the Diploma are insufficient. This leaves learners unclear about the relevance and application of functional skills (Office for Standards in Education, 2010, p. 159).

Further evidence of what does not work comes in Ofsted's criticism of literacy skills teaching which does not bring together the practical and theoretical aspects of vocational learning:

Young people have been disengaged and failed to see why these skills are important or how they can be applied. The most successful providers have broken down this false distinction and, by integrating key skills provision fully within a vocational context, are gaining better engagement and higher achievement (*ibid.*, p. 168).

Another possible factor hindering sustained and widespread literacy development is the short 'shelf life' of many interventions in literacy teaching such as the DfEE's non-statutory Secondary National Strategy for Key Stage 3 introduced in 2001 despite the existence already of a statutory National Curriculum. Within the Strategy, considerable emphasis was placed on Literacy Progress Units (LPUs). They were not necessarily to be taught by teachers but by support staff or librarians some of whom did not have relevant subject knowledge for the tasks themselves. Indeed, the LPUs were expressly designed 'not to take subject knowledge for granted' (Department for Education and Employment, 2002, p. x). The expectation was they would be taught, often in out-of-school time, to small groups of Year 7 students who had not achieved Level 4 to help them catch up. This combination of problems meant that from the pilot period onwards the LPUs were often unpopular (Allen, 2002) and they faded out of use.

## What areas of action should be prioritised over the next few years for young people with least developed literacy skills?

From a teacher's perspective the most important area of action arguably lies in initial teacher education and continuing professional development. It involves developing systematic, innovative, well-informed ways of working with young people whose understanding, knowledge and skills in literacy are underdeveloped.

An equally important area of action is the need for critical investigation and detailed research into this area of teaching in order for thinking, debate and professional development to be well-founded and sustained. If schools are to fulfil their potential as places where good teachers have the power to engage young people in literacy learning, then teacher development from the outset needs to be high quality and, since good teachers are always learning, such development needs constant renewal.

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