The Learning and Teaching of Reading and Writing
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We dedicate this book to the three wonderful teachers whose work is described in the following chapters and to their inspired headteachers. As I watched them I learned so much about what makes teachers extraordinary; and I truly understood the power, for tomorrow’s teachers, of observing brilliance in action in the classroom.

Naomi Flynn
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Naomi Flynn is a Senior Lecturer in Primary Education at the University of Winchester where she teaches English, Professional Studies and Early Years subject specialism on several initial teacher education programmes. She taught in inner city primary schools for 18 years; the last four serving as a Headteacher. While teaching in and leading a school she worked through the implementation of the NLS and became interested in why its prescribed pedagogy seemed to work well in some schools but not in others. More recently, her interest was further fuelled by observations of disparate interpretations of the NLS in primary schools that gave student teachers a confusing picture of how best to teach reading and writing. This book grew in part from her desire to show both trainee and qualified teachers some fundamental principles for teaching literacy, using current curriculum guidance, which might anchor them in a sea of variable approaches. She acknowledges with grateful thanks the crucial role played by Rhona Stainthorp, in teaching her to see where theory must partner practice in the classroom.

Rhona Stainthorp is a Professor of Education and Director of the Language and Literacy Research Centre in the School of Psychology and Human Development at the Institute of Education, University of London. Her research interests centre on the development and teaching of reading and writing, including spelling and handwriting. She is a psychologist who has been involved in the professional education of teachers for the last thirty years and contributes to both Initial Teacher Education and In Service advanced courses. The present book grew out of a very fruitful collaboration with Naomi Flynn when she supervised her MA work, which received a distinction.
I  Learning and Teaching
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1 How to Read this Book

This book contains a combination of guidance relating to literacy development and research into the teaching of literacy in three effective schools. It is intended to support trainee and newly qualified teachers in adopting a confident, research-based rationale for their pedagogy for teaching reading and writing. It will also be useful for more experienced teachers and for literacy coordinators and consultants because it provides a very detailed report on literacy practice in successful schools and can thus support school improvement. It is a celebration of the work of three schools and three effective teachers of literacy. It also supports teacher subject knowledge for literacy both in terms of understanding the development of current classroom practice and in understanding the significance of research related to literacy development. By using all of the chapters in this book you will be able to see how research can inform your practice and generate a much more purposeful and well-grounded logic to your planning and delivery for literacy teaching. You will also develop an understanding of how knowledge about the teaching of children with English as an additional language can provide a rich resource even for teachers of monolingual speakers.

However, you may also use this book in parts. Chapter 2 explains in detail how the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) became the blueprint for teaching reading and writing in English primary schools. The text follows arguments for and against the NLS together with documents monitoring its rise and its strengths and weaknesses in the first seven years. Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the reader to research-based models of reading and writing and Chapter 5 covers the general issues for children who speak English as an additional language (EAL). Each of these chapters could stand alone. Our purpose for including them is to enhance understanding of many of the points we make in later chapters when we discuss our three effective teachers of literacy and their schools. They allow the reader to see how schools and teachers might use their understanding of literacy development and individual needs to fuel their decisions for classroom practice rather than responding to printed guidance.

We refer to our research occasionally in Chapters 2 to 5 but the real heart of this book is in its later chapters where we report on the detail of the practice of the three Year 2 teachers observed teaching the Literacy Hour. We explain the background to their thinking, their planning and their choices for delivery. In describing their practice we provide fine-grained analyses of each lesson in order to demonstrate how their chosen pedagogy matched findings related to effective teaching and, more importantly, to research on how children
develop as readers and writers. These chapters will give food for thought to both new and experienced classroom practitioners. They include references to the research discussed in all of the earlier chapters in the book and show how the teachers’ practice was a successful marriage of the NLS Framework for Teaching and their understanding of the theoretical basis for early literacy development.

As we introduce these teachers it will become obvious that the large number of EAL pupils in their classes influenced Aidan’s and Bridget’s practice in particular. Those readers teaching pupils who are all, or almost all, monolingual English speaking pupils may feel that there is little to help them in engaging with their practice. They may, for example, feel more drawn to the observations of Clare whose class was more mixed and who had had different influences on her practice in terms of school setting. Nevertheless, we would urge such readers to observe the practice of all three teachers because, although each had unique qualities that make them fascinating to study, the underlying similarities will demonstrate the richness of practice that is based on understanding how children develop as readers and writers. There is something that each teacher can show us regardless of the settings in which we teach ourselves.

When we studied the practice of these teachers in 2003 we observed the very significant role that successful teacher-talk played in scaffolding learning during their lessons. Success in any lesson was due to a combination of careful planning, effective management of pupils and support staff, secure subject knowledge and rich experiences of teaching English; but the way in which these teachers communicated with their pupils during the lesson appeared perhaps most significant. In the original research we coded the types of teacher-talk that we observed and produced a range of histograms detailing teacher–pupil interaction for each part of the lesson. Such detail is not appropriate for a book of this kind but reference in the teacher chapters to the ways in which the teachers spoke to their pupils has grown from this earlier microanalysis.

In the concluding chapter we report on interviews carried out in 2005 and explore how the schools had moved yet further way from their use of the NLS as they embraced a more creative approach to curriculum planning and delivery. We discuss implications for the practice of individual teachers and of whole-school approaches to teaching literacy.

Throughout our commentary we refer to our schools and our teachers by names. In order to give you a reference point for keeping track of them, the following table details everyone mentioned. In keeping with the ethics of research-based writing all the names are pseudonyms.

Our wish is that you draw from this book two key messages, namely:

- that truly effective pedagogy for literacy grows from a deep understanding of how children learn to be readers and writers
that starting from the children’s learning needs will always be more important in generating successful lessons, than starting with the requirements of any one curriculum framework.

This book will help you to see how you might develop both of the above in your own practice.

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2 Teaching Reading and Writing in English Primary Schools: an Historical Perspective

In this chapter we chart the progress of the NLS as the principal tool used for teaching English in our primary schools. We explore its successes and areas of weakness as evidenced by research and professional commentary. There is some discussion of the link between school effectiveness, school leadership and a corresponding success with the NLS. Furthermore we discuss the ways in which more recent developments in our understanding of effective pedagogy may be encouraging schools to adapt the original model for the Literacy Hour.

The NLS introduced the Literacy Hour and its corresponding Framework for Teaching into English primary schools in 1998. Prior to this a number of schools and local education authorities (LEAs) had been involved in a pilot year – the National Literacy Project (NLP) – which had led to modifications in the original model devised by the architects of the NLS. It was undoubtedly one of the most ambitious and large-scale reforms of teaching undertaken by any country in recent years (Fullan, 2000). It attempted to change not only the curriculum for English, by introducing a very detailed scheme of work, but it also set about changing the way in which primary school teachers organised their teaching of reading and writing; it prescribed what was to many teachers a hitherto unused pedagogy for literacy (Fisher and Lewis, 2002). In tackling both the curriculum content and its delivery simultaneously, the NLS was highly focused in its aim to drive up standards in literacy rapidly. This ambition was at times matched with success but at others met with criticism from academics and inspectors alike. The following discussion tracks the flow of comments regarding the NLS as it attempted to change the face of literacy teaching in English schools.

WHY A NATIONAL STRATEGY? MAKING A CASE FOR REFORM

For those of you who are training, who are new to the profession, or who have entered the profession since 1998, it must be difficult to imagine your teaching
practice for literacy without using the NLS. Before discussing its introduction, therefore, it is valuable to look at the commentary published in the years prior to the NLS, and to develop some insight into why such a radical root-and-branch reform was considered necessary. Some of the ‘evidence’ used as a lever for reform was a series of HMI and OfSTED reports between 1991 and 1998, which tracked some improvement in educational standards in schools. These reports make for slightly confusing reading because sometimes they appear to be heavily critical of the teaching of English while acknowledging some improvement of educational standards generally and in the quality of teaching.

It would be disingenuous of us not to acknowledge that what should be entirely an educational issue is often led by the political agenda of the time. Prior to the onset of the National Literacy Project in 1997, the agenda of the then Conservative government included a ‘back-to-basics’ policy that was also championed by HMCI Woodhead who has since come to be widely associated with a right agenda for schools. The ‘Aunt Sally’ of this agenda was to suggest that any approach to education that was not predicated on ‘back to basics’ was ‘loony left’.

However, it is now clear that there were concerns about the teaching of literacy that crossed the political divide and it is often very difficult to differentiate between the policies of either of the main English political parties. At the time when the back-to-basics policy was becoming more prominent and Woodhead was HMCI, the concept of regular school inspection using OfSTED was introduced for the first time. This perhaps coloured the tone of some reports because they seemed almost evangelical in their desire to rid the primary sector of what were considered ‘loony-left’ practices. For example, in *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools*, an HMI report of 1992, this statement was made:

> Over the last few decades the progress of primary pupils has been hampered by the influence of highly questionable dogmas, which have led to excessively complex classroom practices and devalued the place of subjects in the curriculum.

(DES, 1992, p. 1)

Nevertheless, there was evidence of poor performance among pupils, particularly those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and, leaving aside politics, there was perhaps a strong case for reform. This reform of literacy and mathematics teaching started under the Conservatives but was in fact implemented by the Labour government after Labour’s election victory in 1997. Evidence of how the case for reform grew in strength can be seen by an analysis of commentary prior to 1997.

To begin at some sort of beginning – bearing in mind that any process of reform will draw on decades of preceding thinking and practice – we will start
with an introduction to the Kingman Report (DES, 1988). In the same way that Plowden and Bullock have remained key publications long after their initial high-profile introductions, Kingman should be understood in the context of its influence on how post-1988 literacy teaching was shaped. The committee responsible for writing this report was commissioned to do so following concern from HMI, during the 1980s, that there were weaknesses in the teaching of English language in primary and secondary schools. Their concern was not only over weaknesses in teaching but in what they saw as a correlation between ineffective literacy teaching and poor teacher subject knowledge about the English language. As you read the concerns of later writers featured in this chapter you will observe that this particular worry did not appear to fade as new initiatives were introduced. Indeed, we would argue that it is precisely the acquisition and maintenance of sound subject knowledge that underpinned the success of the effective teachers we studied for this book.

The Kingman Report, written 10 years before the NLS was rolled out in English primary schools, considered spoken and written English and the relationship between the two in considerable detail. It attempted to set out a series of recommendations that might introduce more rigour into the teaching of English. For example it put forward the idea that all primary and secondary teachers should receive specific instruction in order to develop their subject knowledge for English. In particular, the committee was keen to illustrate the need for individuals – teachers and their pupils – to understand the ‘forms of the English language’. To illustrate what they meant by this they identified separate parts to language – similar to the word, sentence and text level divisions we see in the NLS – but also identified how detailed knowledge of language for communication, reading for comprehension and writing for different purposes were necessary parts of English language subject knowledge. This in turn influenced the nature of the National Curriculum for English, which has as its three attainment targets speaking and listening (AT 1), reading (AT 2) and writing (AT 3).

The portrait of the English language that was drawn in this report was rich and complex. It provided the reader with a combination of observation, guidance and recommendations that now look very different from the inspection-driven professional commentary we see today. It clearly articulated a case for teaching children specific language conventions in order to enhance their use of spoken and written English but did not suggest that this would be done in the compartmentalised way we might sometimes observe with teaching using the NLS. References to the interrelationship of speaking to writing and of reading to writing are made throughout the report. In particular, the report underlines the importance of teacher confidence in supporting successful English teaching. The following extract comes from a section on reading; the italics are presented as they are in the report:
The teacher’s knowledge of the tools of analysis, linguistic and literary, should be confident and comprehensive. *It is for the teacher to decide how much of that knowledge is made explicit to the pupil or class at a given moment, and how it might be done...* Without such developing language knowledge, the implicit gradually becoming explicit and articulated, a child’s capacity for intelligent reading and for reflection upon what is read will be restricted.

(DES, 1988, p. 37, para. 15)

In the context of more recent guidance from the NLS, the italicised sentence is interesting. If in 1988 Kingman considered that teacher autonomy was worth supporting with emphasis, how, by 1998, did we reach a point where teachers were handed very precise instructions as to how they might teach both reading and writing?

By way of explanation we should point out that, in education in England, there has developed a tension between English as an academic discipline in its own right and English as the vehicle for teaching children to read and write. We would maintain that the rolling of teaching reading, writing and spelling in the early years into ‘English’ can be problematic because it appears to assume that reading is the province of the English curriculum rather than a discrete skill that needs to be taught in a focused way. In fact it is theoretically possible to teach reading entirely through science books but historically it has been taught through materials that sit more comfortably with the English curriculum. It may be that, because of this, the focus of the National Curriculum for English seemed to be more on developing an acquaintance with children’s literature than with the teaching of reading and writing. Both of these are important in their own right and children do not have to see them as being exclusive to the English curriculum.

Throughout the 1990s, a series of reports from HMI and later OfSTED painted a picture of weakness in English teaching that did not appear to be improving despite Kingman’s recommendations. There might have been several reasons for this; perhaps the report was never fully embraced and the recommendation to teacher training institutions to include specific English teaching in their courses was not taken up, or perhaps the focus on what was considered important in English teaching changed as the OfSTED inspectorate was introduced. Moreover, perhaps the tension we have described above – English as a subject versus English as teaching reading and writing as skills – was left unexplored. Furthermore, there were concerns not just about the teaching of English but about teaching in primary schools in general and how it had become unfocused in the ways described by *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools* (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992).

This highly influential discussion paper, referred to as that by ‘the three wise men’, set out a picture of unacceptable inconsistency in pedagogy and the curriculum offered in English primary schools despite the introduction
of the National Curriculum in 1989. In fact, the report mentioned the National Curriculum as a possible causal link to declining standards in literacy, explaining that teaching time for the ‘basics’ such as English and mathematics had been squeezed by the introduction of so many subjects not previously taught at primary level. Criticism was levelled at teachers for inflexibility and for unskilled use of time and teaching techniques; there was also mention of the problems caused by teachers’ devotion to topic-based planning, which combined several subjects. The paper called for a sensible approach to the use of whole-class, group and individual teaching, which should reflect the needs of the lesson objectives. The judgement of how to organise pupils for learning was stressed as necessarily ‘educational and organisational, rather than, as it so often is, doctrinal’ (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992, p. 30, para. 99). Yet again we see a pre-NLS reference to the teacher needing to make decisions about classroom organisation based on her professional judgement. Even in this really very critical report there was no suggestion of an imposed pedagogy for any subject. On the contrary the three wise men went on to

endorse the common sense view that teachers need to be competent in a range of techniques in order to achieve different learning outcomes. They need for example, to be able to give precise instructions, to explain ideas clearly, to demonstrate practical activities, to pose different kinds of questions, and to help pupils understand how well they have done.

(Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992, p. 31, para. 103)

Through this series of points they describe the skills of the experienced and effective teacher but do not suggest that there is one method of organisation through which these might be put to best use.

So, through reports from Kingman and the three wise men (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992), we see a picture of concern for pupils’ poor literacy development coupled with an understanding of the need for detailed teacher subject knowledge and the use of higher order teaching skills. A shift in emphasis occurred in 1993 when Alexander, Rose and Woodhead wrote a followup report to their discussion paper (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1993). This document repeated concerns about the need for teachers to leave behind their apparent desire to teach according to topics or themes and to return to a more subject-focused day. It talked of the need for a ‘climate of change’ in primary classroom pedagogy. However, this paper also emphasised that change should be through a gradual process of appraisal and consideration of existing practices. Nevertheless, change was hot on its heels. A review of the National Curriculum in 1995, which released schools from the requirement to teach all nine subjects with the same time allocation, sent a strong message to classrooms that there should be an emphasis on the basics of lit-
eracy and numeracy. Coupled with the fact that the first round of OfSTED inspections was under way at this point, it is perhaps easy to see how a prescribed pedagogy for both these subjects was not far off.

In the mid-1990s, OfSTED began to publish its inspection findings as summarised issues for each subject area. It is interesting to see that, according to their overview of English, from inspections in 1994–5, they considered that the teaching of reading was more than satisfactory. It was described as ‘effectively taught in most schools, especially in Key Stage 1’ (OfSTED, 1996a). The teaching of English was described as satisfactory or better in over four-fifths of schools and teachers’ subject knowledge was considered ‘generally good’. Although there is more concern over the teaching of writing and over standards of attainments in writing, inspection findings of this period seem to sit at odds with the view expressed in earlier reports and in a second report published in the same year. This gives rise to still further speculation about the weakness in reading and writing standards among UK children being a perceived rather than an actual weakness.

It is this second report that probably paved the way for an aggressively centralised stance on how literacy should be taught in English schools. This report, *The Teaching of Reading in 45 Inner London Primary Schools* (OfSTED, 1996b), drew on observation and reading-test data from pupils in Years 2 and 6 in schools in three inner-London LEAs. The picture was grim. Teaching was described as weak in a third of lessons and as hampering pupil progress. This weakness was observed coming from inadequate phonics teaching, unproductive and routine ‘hearing’ of reading, which involved very little actual teaching, insufficient resources to fulfil the requirements of the National Curriculum and a general unevenness in the quality of teaching within schools as well as between schools. Where teaching was good it was described as in ‘sharp contrast to much that was mediocre or weak’ (OfSTED, 1996a, p. 7). Again we see criticism of teaching methods in these weaker lessons: ‘At the heart of the problem is a commitment to methods and approaches to the teaching of reading that were self-evidently not working when judged by the outcomes of pupil’s progress and attainment’ (OfSTED, 1996b, p. 7).

Although not a report on all schools in England and Wales – only on some facing unusually high levels of social disadvantage in their pupil population – it stood as a final indictment of the inconsistency in teaching reading that was seen as ‘the problem’ at the time. Although, as we can see from the paragraph above, the findings were not necessarily supported by inspection evidence from a wider range of schools, anxiety was fuelled further by the perception that UK pupils lagged behind their European counterparts in reading attainment. We now know that this belief was perhaps misplaced, as evidenced by PISA (2000) and PIRLS (2001) data, which we will discuss later in this chapter.
By 1997, when the NLP was operating in underperforming schools and LEAs in the UK, there seems to have been a widespread assumption that the teaching of English was in crisis and something had to be done about this. There was also no question that this ‘doing’ had to come from central government. Thus, despite reports that discussed pedagogy as the domain of the teacher and of educationalists, a successful takeover bid for centralised control by politicians and their associated government departments seems to have gone ahead largely unchallenged. Their confidence and the accompanying confidence of the profession in them was perhaps supported by a perception that the NLP had provided the magic recipe through which pupils would improve their reading and writing.

In their review of the NLP (OfSTED, 1998) inspectors spoke in glowing terms of the ‘clear improvement in the quality of teaching’ and a 10% rise in the number of lessons graded satisfactory or better. Given that the NLP targeted schools where literacy standards were known to be weak, an improvement following additional funding, resources, LEA adviser attention and a programme of in-service training is hardly surprising. Interestingly, there was still a minority of schools for whom standards did not rise and there was recognition that this would only happen in these schools with sustained ‘teaching of the highest calibre’. What the review did not address was the fact that it would have been these schools – those most challenged by their intake and with a long history of underachievement – that needed to address school improvement at whole school level before concentrating on only one subject. In this way, the narrowing of inspection evidence to focus only on weak schools using the NLP may have led to two erroneous perceptions. Firstly, that the NLP findings should be generalised to all schools – including those that were already doing well with their chosen pedagogy for literacy; and secondly that the weaker schools were failing with the NLP because of weaknesses in teaching – not because of weaknesses in the Literacy Hour structure or because of wider school improvement issues.

How, by 1998, the country was ready for a national literacy strategy is not straightforward. Whether standards were low seems open for debate and no one seems to have questioned whether a project tried for one year in weak schools should have been generalised to all schools. Regardless of this apparent confusion, a sense of urgency grew to provide the profession with a template based on the better practice observed in schools at the time and to try and address perceived inconsistencies in teaching literacy by imposing a national strategy. Whether the NLP and subsequent NLS were based on anything other than a perception of what constituted good literacy teaching – rather than an informed response to research findings – has been the subject of debate ever since. In order that teachers who have not experienced any other form of literacy teaching do not accept the NLS as ‘received wisdom’ it is important that we follow this debate with interest.
Turning first to defence of the NLS and of the implementation of a large-scale initiative to radically change the national pedagogy for teaching literacy, much can be found in the writings of Beard (2000a, 2000b, 2003). In a paper arguing against the efficacy of Plowden-influenced individualised teaching (Beard, 2000b, p. 246) he defended the introduction of the NLS on several counts. Firstly he cited weaknesses in classroom practice for literacy prior to 1998, which failed to tackle continuing underachievement in reading and writing (HMI, 1991; OfSTED, 1996b, in Beard, 2000b). Secondly he described the ways in which the model of the Literacy Hour is supported by research.

Beard described a pre-NLS pedagogy for reading, which was largely based on hearing individual pupils read. He depicted a scene of overdependence on brief periods of teacher–pupil interaction, which necessarily characterised teacher time management in teaching reading individually to a class of 30. This one-to-one instruction, he argued, was less efficient in terms of the quality of any teacher–pupil interaction; indeed, teacher–pupil interaction may be simply a reaction to errors rather than having a specific teaching focus. ‘Such short-burst interactions militate against the kind of scaffolded discourse which can explain and encourage links between reading and writing’ (Beard, 2000b, p. 248). Furthermore he cited evidence in school effectiveness research pointing to the advantages of whole, group and class teaching ‘over individualised methods in accelerating pupil attainment’ (Beard, 2000, p. 247).

One only has to do the sums. With a class of 30 children, and allowing for a maximum of 5 minutes for each child, a teacher would have to spend two-and-a-half hours a day hearing children read on an individual basis. Take off time for assembly, registration and playtime and there could hardly have been any time left for teaching the rest of the curriculum. Or conversely, if the rest of the curriculum was being covered, predating the teaching of reading on individualised one-to-one sessions would have meant short, snatched unfocused teaching. We should also bear in mind that before the onset of the NLS class sizes were generally greater than 30 and teaching assistants as we know them today were very rare.

In exploring and defending the introduction of shared writing in the Literacy Hour, Beard looked to a number of well regarded studies that have focused on the impact of teacher modelling to improve children’s text production. He drew on studies such as those by Derewianka (1990) where children were able to produce high quality text after a long period of research on subject content to aid their writing and a planned input by the teacher to support them in their understanding of structure register and tone for information writing. In other words, children were better able to write when they were familiar with the subject and when they had learned the characteristics