Research for Teachers

Effective early literacy teaching in the first years of school

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What makes teachers and schools effective at improving children's literacy skills?
Literacy teaching is a hotly debated topic in education. For thisTLA research summary we looked across three separate primary school studies to see what they can collectively tell us about effective literacy teaching.

The three studies are:

Wharton-McDonald, Ruth, Michael Pressley and Jennifer Mistretta Hampston. 'Literacy Instruction in Nine First-Grade Classrooms: Teacher Characteristics and Student Achievement'. *Elementary School Journal* 99.2 (1998).

Pressley, Michael and Ruth Wharton-McDonald, et al. 'A Study of Effective First Grade Literacy Instruction'. *Scientific Studies of Reading* 5.1 (2001).

Taylor, Barbara M. and P. David Pearson, et al. 'Effective Schools and Accomplished Teachers: Lessons about Primary-Grade Reading Instructions in Low-Income Schools'. *Elementary School Journal* 101.2 (2000).

The studies are from the US, but the issues will be familiar to all teachers of literacy in England. We think that the examples provided in the three studies will help teachers relate the research to their own contexts. The three studies were all included in a recent systematic review of effective literacy teaching in the 4 to14 age range of mainstream schooling.

They were selected for this synthesis because they were judged by the review team to provide significant evidence about the characteristics and practices of effective teachers of literacy. They complement each other and they provide evidence about issues and practice in literacy teaching which address the needs and interests of teachers in England. The RfT team has looked across all three studies for evidence about the ways in which teachers who are judged to be highly effective teach, with additional evidence from the third study about school

factors which support effective teaching of literacy. We have looked at the three studies as forming a 'sequence' of evidence:

- first, a localised study of effective teaching of literacy involving nine teachers from four school districts, ranging from lower-middle to upper-middle class communities, in a single state of the US (Wharton-MacDonald et al)
- second, a larger study in five different regions with 30 teachers (Pressley et al)
- finally, a study which looked at school factors as well as teacher characteristics (Taylor et al).

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Overview

Why is the issue important?

Raising standards in literacy is high on many schools' agendas, and particularly those catering for pupils from poor areas.

What did the research show?

In the classrooms of effective teachers:

- pupils wrote long compositions that included capitalisation and punctuation of sentences by the end of first grade
- pupils spelt many high frequency words correctly and made good use of invented spelling of other words
- most pupils read books at or above first grade reading level
- low achievers made considerable progress - all struggling pupils were writing coherent texts of at least one page, with fairly good punctuation.

How was this achieved?

Effective teachers:

- taught phonics explicitly and integrated skills with high-quality reading and writing experiences
- made extensive use of scaffolding and differentiation (ie. matched tasks to pupil competence)
- made strong cross-curricular connections and had multiple goals in one lesson
- encouraged children to learn how to learn
- were aware of their own practices and the goals underlying them.

Statistically significant school factors included good communication and collaboration between colleagues and systematic assessment of pupil progress.

How was the research designed to be trustworthy?

The three separate studies used a number of methods to gather evidence about effective teaching, including: classroom observation, interviews with teachers, questionnaires, and teacher logs. One study focused on three effective and six less effective teachers from a relatively affluent district in the US. A follow up study focused on ten teachers - an effective and less effective teacher in each of five US states. A third study (independent of the other two studies) involved seventy teachers and 280 pupils from fourteen high poverty schools. Multivariate analysis was used to explore the relationship between school effectiveness and classroom instruction.

What are the implications?

The research showed the importance of:

- linking whole language and phonics skills approaches in a balanced and mutually supportive way, and pupils making use of a range of problem-solving strategies
- moving from a 'telling' style to a more interactive style to raise pupils' engagement with literacy and improve their

ability to understand and to write stories
- formal monitoring at whole-school level together with strategies for moving pupils between learning groups
- using strategies based on 'scaffolding' and 'conferencing' to extend pupils' competencies in comprehending and writing.

What do the case studies illustrate?

The case studies show:

- some school factors that influence older children's success in reading
- contrasting approaches adopted by two teachers who wanted their classes to understand the writing process - one successful and one less successful
- how a productive conference with a child during the process of writing a story helped a child make meaningful revisions
- an effective spelling programme that integrated spelling and writing
- a way of providing scaffolding through writing frames
- how a teacher boosted her pupils' confidence with spelling, by encouraging a 'can-do' attitude.

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Study

What did the researchers want to find out and how did they go about it?

The three studies aimed to find out more about how to recognise 'effective' teachers of literacy and to understand more fully the complex mix of professional knowledge, beliefs and classroom actions that is associated with successful literacy teaching. In addition, the third study set out to identify school-level factors which helped enhance literacy.

The studies by Wharton-McDonald et al (1998) and Pressley et al (2001) analysed the differences in reading instruction and perspectives between effective and less-effective first grade teachers (children aged 6-7 years). The first study focused on nine teachers from a single district - a relatively affluent district of the US. The second study built on this research. It involved 30 teachers who taught in five different areas and was therefore considered by the researchers to bemore representative of contemporary America. By extending the study geographically they reduced the effect of local factors such as particular tests, curriculum guidelines, etc and thereby enhanced the generalisability of the findings.

The third study, conducted by Taylor et al (2000), went beyond the teachers to look at school as well as classroom factors related to reading achievement in the first three years of elementary school (6-9year olds). The study focused on schools with moderate to high numbers of children from poor areas (receiving a subsidised school lunch). The aim was to find both instructional and organisational factors thatmight explain how and why some schools attained greater than expected primary reading achievement with pupils from poor areas.

How did teacher effectiveness affect pupil engagement and performance?

The teachers initially proposed for the study included teachers judged by their schools to be effective and those they considered to be less effective (but not weak). From interviews and observations the researchers found that the teachers varied enormously in their effectiveness at promoting literacy. Pupils in the best classrooms were highly motivated to read and write and were doing both well. In the classrooms of effective teachers:

- all or nearly all pupils were on task - more than 90% of pupilsengaged in productive reading and writing more than

90% of the time. At no time was engagement observed to be less than 65%

- pupils averaged around 135 minutes a day on reading activities,of which 90 minutes was spent in small group or whole-class instruction and 30 minutes on independent reading
- pupils wrote long compositions that included capitalisation and punctuation of sentences by the end of first grade
- pupils spelt many high frequency words correctly and made good use of invented spelling of other words
- most pupils read books at or above first grade reading level
- low achievers made considerable progress - all struggling pupils were writing coherent texts of at least one page, with fairly good punctuation.

In contrast, in classes of less effective teachers the research found:

- engagement was more variable (20%-85% in one classroom) or consistently low (about 65% in another). Pupils were disengaged either because they did not understand the work, were disinterested in the activity or the tasks were too easy or too hard
- writing typically consisted of only a few sentences, with poor spelling and punctuation by the end of first grade
- much of the pupils' reading was of books below first grade level- approximately half of the pupils in the weaker classrooms ended the year reading at an early to mid-first grade level and several of the pupils were still reading books with only a couple of words per page.

The data provided a means of measuring actual teacher performance. Oncethey had compared their findings about the effectiveness of teachers the researchers probed all the data they had collected to draw out the fine detail of the practices and beliefs associated with effective teachers and with their less effective colleagues.

What did the researchers find out about effective teachers of literacy?

Unsurprisingly, effective schools and accomplished teachers were characterised by a complex mix of skills and behaviours and an abilityto deploy these in response to specific needs and contexts. In this synthesis we have drawn together the common threads across the three studies and identified six core issues which were related to effective teaching of literacy:

- balance of teaching styles
- approaches to skills and strategies
- integration of reading and writing activities
- expectations
- classroom management
- the deployment of a variety of strategies for supporting children's learning.

The Taylor study went beyond exploring issues related to teaching to identify a number of school-level factors which the researchers related to effective literacy teaching, including:

- strong school-parent links
- a positive and friendly environment
- good communication and collaboration among colleagues
- pupils' working in small groups
- systematic monitoring of pupils' progress.

In the pages that follow we will set out and explore each of these points in turn.

How did effective teachers achieve balanced teaching styles?

All teachers used some mixture of direct phonics instruction and wholelanguage type activities, but effective teachers achieved a better balance between whole-language and phonic skills than did their lesseffective colleagues. The researchers observed a number of significant features in the practice of effective teachers including:

- teachers taught sounds to pupils, but in a less isolated context than demanded in a purely phonic approach
- teachers taught decoding skills explicitly through teachermodelling, conscious revisiting of key points and opportunistic teaching, for example, word recognition strategies were cued whenpupils encountered difficulties in decoding, and spelling strategies were cued when pupils were experiencing difficulties when writing
- explicit phonics teaching was supplemented by coaching of strategies for applying phonics to everyday reading
- pupils were taught to attend to several cues at once, for example sounds, pictures and reading around the unknown word in a sentence
- pupils were constantly immersed in reading and writing activities while they were learning literacy skills.

In the classrooms of effective teachers, during reading and writing activities, pupils read and wrote alone, with buddies and with adults.They read orally, silently and in unison using sets of progressively more difficult books which were available to them in the classroom. In these classrooms, teachers read good quality literature aloud to their pupils.

Less effective teachers were less flexible in their approach. They tended to use strategies which were based heavily on skills approaches (giving children explicit instruction in sub-skills, such as phonics) or whole language approaches (surrounding children in an environmentrich in print and opportunities to use print in authentic situations,including writing, to allow their literacy skills to develop naturally). Some less effective teachers used combinations of these two methods, but not in a way which consistently supported pupils' learning. For example a teacher who used a whole language approach also had weekly spelling tests, based on basic decoding skills, thus teaching literacy skills separately and out of context, rather than teaching skills in support of, and in the context of, other literacy activities.

One teacher of beginning reading summed up the importance of a balanced approach in these words:

'[Teaching beginning reading] is a fine balance between immersing thechild in whole language and teaching skills. If you don't have a balance, it's kind of like trying to fit a square through a circle. It doesn't work. You don't connect with everyone if you don't use a variety of [teaching] strategies.'

One example of a skills approach - paired cued spelling - designed to support other literacy activities is presented in one of the case studies.

Readers may also be interested to read the case study about a phonics approach developed in a Manchester primary school.

What were the distinguishing features of high quality teaching?

Effective teachers could be distinguished from their less effective peers through their approaches to the following issues:

Effective teachers	Less effective teachers

multiple goal achievement within lessons; for example, by taking advantage of learning points for one subject in the context of another lesson, such as sounding out how to spell the word 'heart' during an art lesson	lessons typically had a single goal, with teachers rarely straying from their intended lesson plans
frequently set children high quality reading and demanding writing tasks	frequently set children high quality reading and demanding writing tasks pupils were frequently found to be doing non-demanding activities, such as copying or illustrating
used an interactive style of teaching	teachers used a 'telling' style of teaching
regularly displayed good quality work	teachers either rarely displayed pupils' work or filled wall displays with low quality work, such as trivial worksheets
provided a range of high quality reading books	pupils often 'read' books containing low quality text, such as 'Where's Waldo?' ('Where's Wally' in the English edition) or flipped pages in an encyclopaedia.
asked high-level questions about stories pupils had read	comprehension questions tended to be literal - about the story

The research showed that effective teachers used scaffolding to helptheir pupils learn to read - that is, they monitored pupils' learning and provided assistance in steps, as and when needed. They often made skilful use of questioning. The teachers were effective in respondingto pupils' needs as they grew in competence. Tasks presented to pupils were always slightly beyond their current competence - challenging, but not overwhelming, for example providing reading books that had slightlymore words per page each time. Their less effective colleagues were less skilful at scaffolding. They did not appear to be as aware of how their pupils were thinking. Thus, they were less likely to anticipate problems and areas of confusion and so missed opportunities for learning.

Increasing expectations were also apparent in writing activities. Effective teachers were ready, and expected to provide assistance when needed. They continually monitored their pupils, alert for opportune moments to intervene and prompt the pupil to overcome obstacles. They provided support to aid progress, but did not do the task for the pupil. For example, the teacher might use a sound stretching strategy to help a child spell a word, but did not spell the word for the child.

Readers might find it helpful to look at a case study which compares and contrasts the effects of the two styles of teaching identified here: an 'interactive' and a 'telling' teaching style.

How did effective teachers integrate literacy activities?

In the effective teachers' classrooms:

- reading and writing were interwoven
- there were extensive across-curriculum connections.

Effective teachers frequently used writing to teach reading skills and reading to develop writing skills - the pupils wrote about what they were reading and used books to develop topics they chose for writing. Children learned about the way books are structured and the purpose ofthe various parts, such as the contents and index

pages.

Teachers worked actively to promote comprehension skills, encouraging children to make predictions, construct mental images, and look for and summarise story grammar elements, in order to understand stories better.

Pupils read different kinds of texts, such as stories, summaries and descriptions and had experience of writing them. For example, one teacher asked her pupils to write reports. This project included library research, notes on cards and a final illustrated product.

Effective teachers also integrated and reinforced reading and writing with other subjects. For example, if a science unit was on plants, pupils read about plants, grew a garden, measured their vegetables, recorded the measurements in a notebook and read fiction on the theme of plants. The pupils wrote about their classroom experiences and related fiction.

When asked to estimate what percentage of the day pupils spent actively reading, one effective teacher said:

'I would say everything we do in here...is so integrated that to do anyactivity in here they need to read something. So I would say for everything we do in here, there is a reading portion. So, most of the day...they are immersed in that text! So - well, you just find ways to incorporate it. It can't be separate.'

How did effective teachers support pupils' writing?

All the teachers used the process approach to writing (write drafts,conference with a teacher or peer and edit their early draft into final copy). However, the difference between effective and less effectiveteachers lay in the extent to which pupils understood the process. In the effective teachers' classrooms:

- pupils made more revisions and made revisions more frequently
- pupils wrote a final copy that included a relatively high level of organisation, vocabulary, grammar and punctuation
- the teachers' short, focused, one-to-one writing conversations with their pupils were productive - resulting in meaningful revisions (oftenreferred to as 'conferences' in the research literature)
- teachers helped pupils redraft their writing further, for example by providing editing sheets or cue cards which gave suggestions for whatto check whilst revising
- writing demands were gradually and steadily increased as the year progressed, in terms of length and use of spelling and punctuation
- correct spelling of high-frequency words and reasonable invented spellings of low frequency words was expected
- pupils were expected to use conventions such as capitalizing sentences and ending sentences with punctuation marks.

Readers wanting to know more about process modelling may like to look at the section 'How did effective teachers implement the process approach?' later in this RfT.

To find out about an alternative approach to conferencing readers mightlike to look at the case study that describes one child's conference with a computer tutor.

What expectations did effective teachers have of their pupils?

The researchers reported that effective teachers had high, but realistic expectations for all their pupils. They:

- created a positive ethos in the classroom
- instilled a 'can-do' attitude in their pupils
- managed pupil behaviour, preventing misbehaviour before it occurred, redirecting pupils' behaviour in positive ways

- gave praise for effort, attention and correct responses
- praised pupils for their achievements and taught them to recognise and celebrate other children's achievements
- rarely gave negative feedback, though occasionally gave it in response to disruptive behaviour
- actively encouraged pupils to be independent by monitoring their own progress, the quality of their work and their understanding
- expected pupils to plan their time through exercises such as estimating the time it would take them to complete a task
- taught pupils what to do when they encountered difficulty and how to check through their writing.

Effective teachers believed that there is more to being a 'good reader'or a 'good thinker' than decoding the words or being able to punctuatea sentence correctly. They also believe that good thinkers also have the awareness to know when and where to apply their skills and can monitor their work. Effective teachers observed in the studies encouraged children to monitor their work and explicitly taught themstrategies for tackling difficulties:

'I think you need to provide the kids with the strategies that they needto be good readers...Like if they do get to a word they don't know,they have to know their options. What am I going to do next? Can I skipover the word? Can I use the picture clues to help me figure out what this word is?...it's like a problem-solving ability almost - in math. But geared toward reading.'

Less accomplished teachers were found to have lower expectations oftheir pupils. Some less effective teachers gave praise for neat work and for being quiet whilst others seemed to give praise randomly. One of the least effective teachers rarely praised pupils and often gave negative feedback.

To find out more about an approach designed to create a 'can-do' attitude, readers might like to read the case study about increasing pupils' confidence.

Although all teachers believed maturation plays an important role inlearning to read, unlike their colleagues, effective teachers believed that they could influence children's development of literacy skills, atleast to some extent, irrespective of the pupils' stage ofmaturation. The differences in beliefs towards maturation can be seen in these comments by teachers:

A less effective teacher said:

'For a kid who's not ready to read, I don't care what you do, if they're not really ready, they're not going to read.'

while more accomplished teachers said:

'You could sit there and go through that for five or six weeks working with the same sound and they just don't see how it fits together. And suddenly, the light bulb turns on. And it fits.'

and

'You need to be able to try to find materials, stories that give them more opportunities to make the light bulb turn on.'

How did effective teachers manage their classrooms?

The research suggested that effective teachers organised and managed their classrooms well. They:

- coordinated the instruction provided by classroom assistants who were always involved with pupils
- managed time effectively, ensuring smooth, quick transitions between activities

- were consistently well-prepared
- planned lessons meticulously and had materials ready to hand, thus modelling good organisation to the pupils
- used a variety of group structures across the day - whole class, small groups, pairs and individual work
- had predictable patterns of activities, although their lessons did not necessarily stick rigidly to their lesson plans
- provided pupils with lots of problem-solving strategies for what to do about a word they did not know
- monitored pupils' progress with reading
- assisted pupils with book selections when needed and insisted pupils read their chosen books
- gave their pupils sufficient time to read.

Less effective teachers were not well organised:

- classroom assistants frequently simply sat and watched group lessons
- teachers struggled to complete morning routines such as collecting dinner money
- lessons were often chaotic
- routines were changed frequently.

The research evidence suggested that the differences in teachers'attitudes to organisation were linked to different beliefs about how children learn, as the following comments show. One of the less effective teachers in the study justified his/her poor organisation ofthe classroom in these terms:

'I just keep moving things around. I'm never happy. I'll find something hat works and then a week later, I'll change it...I keep them on their toes like that.'

while a more effective teacher believed it was important to have a regular classroom routine:

'I have a pattern. I do the same thing every day - so the kids know what's going on.'

How did schools contribute to effective literacy teaching and learning?

Evidence in the Taylor study suggests that school factors play a part in enhancing pupils' literacy achievement by:

- organising pupil groupings and monitoring pupil achievement
- building communication with parents
- promoting teacher collaboration.

This study proposed that school wide systematic monitoring and assessment enabled teachers:

- to put pupils into small teaching groups according to ability or needs
- to monitor each pupil's progress to help teachers address pupils' individual needs
- to move pupils to another group in response to their changing needs.

The researchers found that creating good communications with parents helped to increase overall effectiveness of literacy teaching and learning. Schools made links with parents through:

- creating active site councils on which parents served with school staffand helped to make decisions concerning school practices
- conducting phone or written surveys to determine parents' concerns and needs
- establishing successful at-home reading partnerships, whereby parents regularly listened to their children read

- increasing parents' involvement by sharing with them more regular and detailed information about their children's tasks.

All the effective schools made reading a top priority and adopted whole school approaches to supporting the teaching of reading. They did this in a number of ways, including:

- using some form of regular, school-wide, systematic assessment of pupils
- intervening to support reading at the small-group level rather than one-on-one
- developing their own intervention activities in line with their pupils' needs
- implementing interventions across all the primary grades, not just first grade
- encouraging teachers to attend courses regularly.

Teachers in the most effective schools felt that collaboration within their schools contributed to their success. Collaboration included:

- teacher to teacher collaboration in peer coaching and team teaching
- teachers and classroom learning assistants working in the same classroom, teaching children in small groups.

A teacher from an effective school summed up why collaboration is important in these words:

'Teaming with other staff is important. You can't do it by yourself. Teaming also builds a sense of community. If the children see us working together and getting along, that means a lot to them. The children also get to see other teachers and get to know them. That builds caring and community.'

Readers may be interested to read the case study that describes how a middle school designed and implemented a reading programme targeted specifically at Year 5 pupils.

How did effective teachers develop pupils' reading and writing skills?

Effective teachers used a variety of strategies to improve their pupils' reading and writing including:

- coaching
- word-recognition
- seizing and building on learning opportunities, sometimes creating mini-lessons
- scaffolding
- process modelling.

In the pages that follow we will illustrate these strategies.

What coaching strategies did effective teachers use?

Effective teachers coached their pupils in word recognition strategiesand how to apply them whilst their pupils were reading aloud. The following coaching strategies were reported in the Taylor study.

Explaining strategies

A teacher reviewing independence in using word recognition strategies with his class said 'The point is to be able to read on your own this summer. What can you do if you come to a long word? Yes, you can sound it out. What else can you do? Yes, you can twist it a little (for example try a different vowel) or ask yourself if it makes sense, oryou can ask someone'.

Review of strategies used

After a child came up with the word 'squirt' while reading, the teacher asked,

Teacher: How did you figure out the word 'squirt' Tom?
Tom: I sounded it out.
Teacher: You could also look at the picture.
Tom: Also make sure it makes sense.

Praise for use of strategies

After a child has read, the teacher says to the group 'I noticed thatJane got stuck, skipped it, read around it, then came back to it.That's good thinking'.

General prompts to figure out words

A child is stuck on a word while reading and the teacher asks 'What could give you a clue on that word?'

Specific prompts to figure out words

A teacher helping a group: 'What is the first sound? What is the second? What's the word?'

Encouraging metacognitive thinking

A teacher asks pupils to explain how they had arrived at a particularanswer, modelling their thought processes for the rest of the class.'When Kevin made a mistake, what did he do?' (Pupil: "He went back"). 'He went back over it. Is it okay to make mistakes?'

How were pupils taught word-recognition skills in effective classrooms?

The Taylor study reported explicit phonics instruction in whichteachers used charts, whiteboards, worksheets and work cards to displaythe content of their lessons. The following were the most common approaches observed.

Working on phonics elements

'There are a lot of words that don't have the long or short vowel soundbecause they have a bossy letter. 'ur' says /ur/ in 'hurt'. In 'born"or' says /or/. Can anyone think of an /ur/ or /or/ word?" Children also compared phonic elements in different words and noticed that -er,-ir and -ur all have the same sound.'

Making words

Children get letter cards: a,i,g,k,n,p,r. 'Let's start with two lettersto make "in". Change one letter to make "an". Add one letter to make "pan". Rearrange these to make "nap". Then continue until they end up with a word from the story. "parking".'

Working on word families

The teacher uses a sliding device to change the first letter - the children read 'cat, hat, fat, mat or fan, man, can, pan etc.'; 'Excellent, let's try another family'. The children read: 'pig, dig, rig, big, twig'.

Word study

A child sorts picture cards by the first letter 'game, gate, girl'. The teacher asks, 'How about game, lamp, gate and girl. Which one doesn't belong? Let me say them. Do you hear one that doesn't belong?'

Flash cards

A teacher used flashcards to review words the pupils were expected torecognise instantly as sight words. 'These two look like they rhyme ("goes" and "does") but do they?'

Charts

The teacher puts a chart of No excuses words on the board - for examplea, an, and, for, in, will. She calls individual children to read the words. 'Yesterday we read this word in our story: "will". Now use yourwhite board and write "will".'

How did teachers seize and build on learning opportunities during lessons?

The Wharton-McDonald study reported how effective teachers incorporated mini-lessons within their literacy lessons. There was a great deal of opportunistic teaching and planned re-teaching of skills. Frequently, up to 20 skills were covered in a single literacy lesson.

For example, a teacher who had begun a lesson on potatoes, related to both a science unit on plants and a brief unit on Ireland, inserted a mini lesson on using an encyclopaedia:

Teacher: Where else might we get more information about potatoes?
Pupil 1: A potato book!
Teacher: (laughs) A potato book. Where else might we look up information about something like potatoes?
Pupil 2: An encyclopaedia?
Teacher: An encyclopaedia. What would we look up?
Pupil 3: Potato.
Teacher: Under what letter?
Pupil 3: P!
Teacher: (returns to a discussion of the book he is introducing).

Even filling the stapler was seen as an opportunity for teaching by one teacher:

Teacher: What colour are staples?
Pupil 1: Grey.
Pupil 2: Silver!
Teacher: Silver. Why did you change your minds from grey to silver?
Pupil 3: It sparkles.
Pupil 4: It reflects the light.
Teacher: Yes. What does that mean - reflects? It means the light bounces off it - so it sparkles.

How did effective teachers scaffold their pupils' learning?

Scaffolding is the process whereby a teacher monitors pupils' learningcarefully and steps in to provide assistance on an as-needed basis -providing just enough help to facilitate learning, but not so much that they do all the thinking for the child. For an accessible summary ofthe main features and application of this core activity readers might find it helpful to look at our recent RfT about the work of Vygotsky. Further information about scaffolding, is presented in the work of Jerome Bruner. Readers can find out more about his work by looking at further reading.

One effective teacher (involved in the Wharton-McDonald study) explained how scaffolding can be achieved through questioning in these words:

I say to him, 'Well, what's the rule that makes the long sound?' And he says, 'Oh, I need a silent "e" at the

end.' When I've drawn it back out of him, instead of saying, 'The rule is: put an "e" at the end.' When he gives the proper answer, you're moving him to another higher level.

In another effective teacher's classroom, a weak reader was observedasking the teacher how to spell the word 'duck'. This resulted in the following interaction:

Teacher: D-u- what's at the end?
Pupil: I don't know.
Teacher: [writes on the board: 'duk'] Does that look right?
Pupil: No.
Teacher: No, what's missing?
Pupil: [no response]
Teacher: How do you spell 'back'?
Pupil: B-a-c-k.
Teacher: So, how are you going to spell 'duck'?
Pupil: D-u-c-k.
Teacher: Good. [writes 'duck' on the board].

Scaffolding comes in many different forms. Writing frames - aparticular form of scaffolding - whilst not featured in the studies that form the basis of this RfT, are widely used in UK schools. Readers may like to look at the case study where writing frames were used to improve boys' writing confidence and performance.

How did effective teachers implement the process approach?

Process modelling is particularly associated with the work of DonaldGraves. Readers can find out about his work by looking at furtherreading.

The aim of the process approach is to help pupils learn how to improve their writing for themselves. It incorporates elements in which peerconferencing of the child writer with the teacher and other pupils isimportant in helping the child analyse his/her work. For the approach to be effective in helping the writer revise his/her work, it is important that the children - writer and other pupils involved inconferencing - are able to ask relevant questions and make pertinent comments about the writing.

An effective teacher explained one way of helping pupils improve their writing like this:

'If I just said, "Go write about your best friend," they weren't goingto write a whole page okay? There is a lot of preliminary discussionthat happens before they go and do that. I mean, we sit down and wemake a little web. Best friends. What are some of the things we know?You fill out several things on the web. Then you can go and write -what appears to look like a paragraph - looks more like a paragraphthan a single sentence kind of thing ... I would never see the kind ofsuccessful long-term writing from the number of kids that I do if theydidn't have that kind of writing process.'

In contrast, the research showed that without the modelling pupils wereunable to learn to identify relevant questions. In one class, forexample, pupils met in a group to give each other feedback on stories they had written about bunnies. The pupils were instructed to ask theauthor questions to clarify parts they did not understand and, whenpossible, to make suggestions for changes. What actually happened wasthat after each pupil read his/her story, another pupil asked, 'If youhad a bunny, what would you call it?' (A question that had nothing to do with any of the stories presented). Apart from a few spelling errors corrected by the teacher, no editing was observed during the 20 minute group 'conference'.

Readers might find it helpful to look at the case study that compares and contrasts two 'conferences' where pupils were asked to give feedback to other pupils about their writing.

Readers may also like to look at the case study that describes how conferencing with a computer tutor

influenced one child's writing.

How was the research designed and carried out?

Taken together, the three studies used a number of methods to gather evidence about effective teaching, including:

- classroom observation
- standardised reading tests
- interviews with teachers
- questionnaires
- teacher logs.

The study conducted by Wharton-McDonald et al (1998) aimed to identify characteristics that distinguished accomplished first grade literacy teachers from more average teachers. The teachers who participated inthe study were nominated by language arts coordinators. The researchers then measured the teachers' levels of effectiveness through observing their pupils' engagement in lessons and the pupils' reading and writing levels. Three of the teachers were identified as outstanding and six astypical (referred to throughout as 'less effective' teachers). The teachers were interviewed twice about their beliefs and practices. Their literacy instruction was observed twice a month for six months; a total of 200 hours. All the teachers taught in one region of America -upstate New York, a district which is largely suburban and middle-class. The pupils were of all ability levels.

The study conducted by Pressley et al (2001) built on this research byextending the analysis from just one region to five different US districts. The pupils involved in this study were considered by the researchers to be more representative of the full range of diversity in American elementary schools. Thirty first grade teachers were recommended by school administrators. The researchers measured the teachers' levels of effectiveness through observing their pupils' engagement in lessons and the pupils' reading and writing levels, as in study one, thus creating a sample of the most and least effectiveteacher in each of the five states.

The study conducted by Taylor et al (2000) investigated school andclassroom factors related to reading achievement in the first three years of school. Seventy teachers and 280 pupils from 14 schools took part. All the schools had moderate to high numbers of childrenfrom poor areas. Every teacher completed a written questionnaire,completed two week-long logs of literacy activities and were observed teaching literacy during five hour-long literacy lessons. Statistical analyses were performed to investigate systematic differences between the schools. The most, moderately and least effective schools were identified according to measures of pupil reading achievement.

What did the studies focus on?

Studies one and two explored the complexity of primary literacy teaching, including:

- the balance of skills teaching and reading and writing activities
- the quality of children's reading and writing activities and the extent to which they were integrated
- the ways teachers helped pupils build skills into strategies for learning
- the expectations teachers had of their pupils
- the quality of classroom management
- the range of strategies for supporting children's learning.

In addition to the above study two explored the extent of cross-curricular connections made by teachers.

The third study explored teacher characteristics in relation to thesame factors but also investigated school-level factors which seemed tobe related to literacy teaching, including:

- school-parent links
- the nature of the school environment
- the extent of communication and collaboration among colleagues
- how pupils were organised and monitored.

How were the three studies rated in the EPPI review?

The three studies were all included in an Evidence for Policy andPractice Information (EPPI) centre registered systematic review of literacy teaching and learning. EPPI registered systematic reviews of education research are rigorous searches and analyses of evidence about what works in education. The Pressley (2001) and Taylor (2000) studies were both judged by the EPPI review team to be of high quality in relation to the weight of evidence they provided about thecharacteristics of effective literacy teaching. The Wharton-McDonald(1998) study was judged to be of medium quality.

What can we do to improve literacy teaching and learning? - Implications of the research

The research summarised in this latest RfT highlights some importantimplications for teachers of literacy in primary schools in England.Specific areas that teachers may want to consider are:

- lesson planning
- teaching strategies
- supporting pupils in becoming independent learners
- monitoring pupils' progress to assess their needs.

The studies provided evidence that where teachers and learning support staff planned, worked and evaluated closely together they were able torespond to the needs of the pupils, and they were able to support a greater number of pupils. Are there opportunities for such joint approaches in your school? If not, is this an activity seniormanagement would provide time for?

There is a long history of discussion in England and elsewhere about the advantages of whole language as opposed to phonic skills approaches. These studies, however, suggest that literacy teaching ismore effective when the two approaches are linked in a balanced and mutually supportive way. This calls upon a complex mix of skills and judgement. Would teachers working together rather than independently find it easier to secure the right balance for your school and your children?

Moving from a 'telling' style to a more interactive one seems to be instrumental in raising pupils' engagement with literacy and in improving their ability to understand and to write stories. This changeis probably not one that teachers can make in a single jump. Peer coaching and action research combined with specialist support areapproaches to sustained professional learning that have been shown tobe linked to the development of teaching with less 'telling' and to have a range of 89 positive effects for teachers and for pupils (Youmay wish to find out more about how teachers have used peer observationand feedback to do this by referring to our recent RfT about CPD whichwas linked to a positive impact on teaching and learning.)

The researchers found that pupils' confidence grew when teachers held high expectations of them. A core factor here appeared to be the children's feeling of being able to cope with problems they met in their literacy work because they had access to a range of problem-solving strategies. Among the strategies highlighted were splitting words up, sounding out words and using pictures to provide clues. Could you and your colleagues develop a bank of such problem-solving strategies together? Sharing strategies for helping pupils to cope might lead to fresh insights into how pupils learn literacy as well as providing a helpful resource and enhancing pupilconfidence and teacher expectations.

Whilst most teachers carry out their own monitoring and informalassessment as they teach, the study suggested that more formal monitoring at whole-school level together with strategies for movingpupils between learning groups could be particularly effective. Do you have access to whole-school information as

well as to data about your pupils' learning in individual classes? If not, would a bigger picture of the details help?

The researchers found that strategies based on 'scaffolding' and 'conferencing' were helpful in extending pupils' competencies in comprehending and writing. Not all schools will have staff who are familiar with these approaches but it might be an area in which teachers could draw on the knowledge of outside experts' - such as LEA or university personnel. (To find out more about scaffolding see, forexample, our RfT about Vygotsky. More information about conferencing can be found in Donald Graves' book - see Further Reading.)
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Case studies

The following independent case studies, drawn from a variety of sources, show how teachers have implemented strategies aimed to improve literacy teaching and learning in their own classrooms.

Teaching writing using the process approach

We have chosen this case study because it contrasts an interactive approach the process strategy with a 'telling' style thereby illustrating the complexity of implementing literacy strategies in the classroom. Both teachers used an extended writing process, set up the writing activity as a set task and gave frequent and precise directions. However, whilst one teacher succeeded in producing enthusiastic writers and highly effective writing, the other produced disengaged writers who were disinterested in improving their writing. The researcher suggested that the reason why one teacher was more successful than the other lay in the roles they took within the writing projects and the effect these had on the children's attitudes to writing and each other.

Teacher A: Rob
Rob used a 'telling' teaching style. He began his lessons by reminding the children of what he considered the important points they should remember to guide their work, and also gave them instructions on how to carry out the task. He tended to ask closed questions to check the children's understanding, prompting them to give answers of a single word or phrase. He directed them closely, giving them set amounts of time for writing, stopping them when he wanted to move on to the next stage or to make a teaching point. Despite Rob's careful instruction, the children's level of engagement with the activity and the quality of their writing were disappointing, as the following extract shows:

Mary, who is a Year 6 pupil, reads out a story she is writing for a five-year-old, to Lily.
Mary: On the Farm. One day, on the farm, there was a dog, a cat, a baby cat...
Lily: a kitten.
Mary: ...a baby kitten...
Lily: No, it's just a kitten.
Mary: ...a kitten and a pig. That day the...
Lily: ...kitten...
Mary: ...the kitten went for a walk on its own. Out behind a tree appeared a cow. It said, "come with me" so the cow dragged the kitten into its cave. An hour later the cow was asleep so the baby cat escaped...
Lily: ...the kitten...
Mary: ...and ran back to the farm. Its mum was so pleased. The dog and the pig had a party and they lived happily ever after. The end.
Lily: That's good but at the beginning it just said 'On the farm'. You could have had a more exciting title.
Mary: All right. Now you read yours.

The researcher commented on how this extract shows how the two girls seem equally uninterested in

improving the quality of Mary's story. Lily does not question the storyline: why the cow had a cave, why it captured the kitten, how it dragged the kitten, why the cow fell asleep etc. Mary has omitted a good deal of the detail the reader needs in order to make sense of her intended meaning.

Teacher B: Jane

Jane used an 'interactive' teaching style. The lesson began with the children listening to a short piece of classical music. Jane asked the children to jot down any thoughts, words or images suggested by it. After the children had shared their ideas in twos and threes, she called the whole class to sit on the carpet in front of her chair so they could share their ideas.

Jane: Who'd like to read their piece out first? Lucy, what did the music suggest to you?
Lucy: Waves curl their foamy tops
Showing sailors where to go;
Dolphins dazzle in the air,
Sunlight sparkles in the snow.
Jane: What did the rest of you like about that?

Several children suggest phrases they like in Lucy's piece.

Jane: Anything you want to ask?
Sam: I don't see how the dolphins dazzle in the air.
Ann: I do. The dolphin is wet and it sparkles in the sun.
Jo: I saw it leaping out of the water.
Jane: Oh I see, so the water on its skin catches the sunlight as it leaps.
Lucy: That's what I meant.

Here Jane emphasised the visual aspect of composition through illustration and allusion, whereas Rob might have given a lengthy explanation.

Jane: All right, but I'm not sure about your line on the snow. I love it, but I'm not sure it fits.
Lucy: Yes, it doesn't fit, but it just rhymes.
Jane: It's hard taking out a line when you've thought of it.
Sam: Specially in a poem, 'cos you have to really think about each one.
Jo: Each word, you mean.
Lucy: But it's got a rhythm
Jane: Yes, it's got a good rhythm, but you could just change some of it. Think of the picture you're trying to describe before you start worrying about rhyme.
Sam: I find that rhyming makes you choose the wrong word sometimes.
Jane: That's an interesting thought Sam. Can you tell us more?
Sam: Well, like Lucy said, a word or a whole line just pops into your head sometimes because it rhymes, but it doesn't always make sense in your poem. And you've just got to get rid of it.
Jane: You have, haven't you, but that's hard sometimes.

This extract illustrated aspects of the culture in Jane's classroom. She set an open task, then gave sensitive, flexible support to children working at it, without fully controlling what they did, thus initiating a chain of thinking, from which the writing itself would be generated. Also notable in this episode, was the quickly changing relationship between teacher and pupils. Jane sometimes directed, but she was willing also to adopt the role of learner ('That's an interesting thought Sam. Can you tell us more?') or of fellow writer ('It's hard taking out a line when you've thought of it'). Pupils switched easily into a teaching role, as Sam did. They demonstrated a degree of engagement with the craft of writing that was never observed in Rob's classroom.

The critical factors which produced enthusiastic writers and highly effective texts were frequent sharing sessions in which:

- pupils read out their work in progress for others to comment on
- the teacher regularly showed a willingness to share the responsibility for teaching with the children
- the teacher modelled the kinds of responses to be made by the class to pupils' work
- pupils received immediate feedback (praise and criticism) on their work from a real audience.

Reference:

White, C. (2000) Strategies are not enough. The importance of classroom culture in the teaching of writing. *Education* 3-13 Vol. 28 No. 1.

Conferencing with HARRY - a computer tutor for story writing

We chose this case study because it provides an example of how one-to-one conferencing is used to support pupils' writing. In this particular example, the child received suggestions about how to revise her story from a computer tutor designed to simulate a conference with a human teacher, but the suggestions could just as easily be made by a teacher.

When writing a story with HARRY, the child works on a section at a time, such as the opening, the setting, the main event, a problem or the ending. Suggestions for plot ideas, useful words and alternative ways of writing sentences are available in pop-up boxes throughout the time the child is writing the story. When the child has completed the first draft, s/he is expected to proof read the story and is given suggestions by HARRY for what could be changed and how to make the changes. The suggestions are made available to help children revise their writing - rethink their original ideas, choice of words and sentence structure in order to improve their story.

Many of HARRY's suggestions influenced Rachael's ideas as she worked on her story about a pirate ship. When planning her story, Rachael recorded details concerning the ship's appearance. She intended to call it the 'scruffy ship' because it was 'really scruffy', 'dirty and untidy', with a 'rusty funnel'. However, when Rachael wrote her opening paragraph, after looking at HARRY's suggestions, she showed how she had now considered the ship's appearance from the Captain's point of view - although the ship was shabby, he considered it beautiful! This is how she started her story in response to the following suggestions:

HARRY: Set the scene. Your story could start with the pirates on board ship, or perhaps walking along the quay towards their ship. Describe the scene as if you are videoing it. Give lots of detail...Is it a big ship? Is it shabby or neat? What is its name?

Rachael: "There she is, she's beautiful " the captain sighed. The captain of the good ship Golden Girl was looking at his rusty dirty ship and he was calling it beautiful! The crew were saying their goodbyes to there family and friends. "All aboard" the captain shouted.

This is how Rachael responded to another of HARRY's suggestions.

HARRY: Something could go wrong or the pirates could make a mistake. Make the pirates argue over something, like this, "It's all your fault." "No, it isn't." "It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't..."

Rachael: It is all your falt you two if you weren't so lazy you wouldn't have fell over board" argued the working brothers they were argueing with the lazy twins. The captain left them to argue and went to look threw his telescope to see what he could see. All of a sudden.... "shark" screamed the captain. Every one stopped argueing and ran to help trying to get the boat to go faster and to steer the boat away from the shark.

HARRY's editing suggestions had a profound effect upon Rachael. They prompted her to critically re-evaluate her writing. She deleted words, phrases and sentences, and substituted others several times. For instance, HARRY's suggestion that she find alternative words for 'saw, going and then', caused Rachael to rewrite a paragraph of her story. This is how the paragraph had been written before editing:

Know one was actually helping because they were all trying to steer away from the shark. Nobody noticed what was going to happen. They were steering themselves into a sea rock. Then they all saw what happened they drove themselves through the rock.

Whilst editing Rachael changed the paragraph to:

Know one was actually helping because they were all trying to steer away from the shark. Nobody noticed what would be happening to them in a matter of seconds. They were steering themselves into a sea rock. Soon after they all knew what was happening they had driven themselves through the rock. They thought they had escaped from the shark because a door had opened and let them into a secret hiding place really. So it looked like they were safe but the shark would not give up..... '

Rachael also spent some time rethinking the way she started her sentences in response to HARRY commenting on how she had started many of them with the word 'The'. Giving 'The captain' a name partially helped solve one problem: 'The captain was awakened by cheers of joy' was altered to 'Captain Paul was awakened by cheers of joy', but Rachael was not entirely satisfied with her solution. During the process of correcting spellings with the spell checker available with Microsoft Word, the grammar checker offered an alternative solution: 'Cheers of joy awakened Captain Paul', which, in view of the struggle she had just experienced, clearly felt like inspiration - "Oh, that's how you do it," she remarked.

Reference:
This case study is reported in the following paper:
Holdich C.E., and Chung P.W.H., (2003) A 'computer tutor' to assist children develop their narrative writing skills: conferencing with HARRY, *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* Vol 59, 631-669.

HARRY, the interactive story writing tool, can be found at: www.midlandit.co.uk/education

Improving written vocabulary through paired cued spelling

We have chosen to present the following case study because it describes a spelling strategy which was used to support other literacy activities. The findings of the study may help teachers recognise and deploy strategies that integrate spelling and writing. The study describes a specific spelling programme - paired cued spelling - used by pupils in a primary school in Leicestershire.

Paired cued spelling is a method to aid the learning of spelling using different kinds of cues and prompts, such as rhyme, word association and abbreviation.

The project described in this case study ran for six weeks. To help identify the effects of the programme, pupils took a standard test to determine their spelling age and the SATs English test at the beginning and end of the project.

The spelling programme was organised as follows:

- each week the children were given spelling sheets with five columns containing different types of words (twenty words in total), a diary sheet and an 'I can spell' sheet
- at the beginning of each week, the children checked which words on the list they could spell (asking their partner to give them a quick test) so they could target words they found more difficult to spell
- every day from Monday to Thursday, each child chose a word from each column on their spelling sheet, wrote it on their diary sheet, then used the cues to learn the five words
- on Friday, partners reviewed the twenty words from the week with a quick test - the procedure was repeated for any words spelled incorrectly.

Initially, the pairs worked on their five words a day for thirty minutes, but as the procedure became more familiar, the time was reduced to fifteen minutes a day. In the last three weeks of the study, the pupils were

encouraged to be more independent and to take risks.

The main findings of the study were:

- the programme helped pupils improve their writing - the intervention group of pupils used more descriptive language, more continuous speech and more qualifying phrases to aid description in their second piece of writing
- the intervention group pupils' spelling ages improved on average 0.69 of a year compared to 0.566 of a year for the control group
- the intervention group pupils developed less teacher dependent methods to improve spellings - before the start of the programme, a standard reply to the question who had helped them with their spelling was: "My mum, dad and my teacher helped me". After six weeks of the programme, pupils cited adults, peers and themselves as people who could help them with spellings. For example, "My friends help me", "Everyone helps me"
- the programme helped pupils identify their preferred learning style. When asked what they thought of cued spelling in pairs, some pupils replied, "I like it because it teaches me lots of different cues," and "I think cued spelling is a good way of learning a new word", whilst others said, "I don't think it is as good as splitting the word up".

Reference:
This research project was commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency as part of the Teacher Research Grant Scheme 1996/7 and was written by Robin Marlin, Kestrels' Field Primary School, Leicester.

Investigating the teaching of writing frames: raising standards in boys' writing

We have selected this case study because it describes a way of providing scaffolding through writing frames. Although not apparently used much in the US, they are widely used in the UK to increase pupils' confidence and skills in writing. The study describes a writing frames approach followed by two groups of six Year 5 pupils in an urban primary school. The study focused particularly on a group of boys who did not enjoy reading or writing fiction. A non-fiction writing genre was chosen - reports.

Writing frames are formats that provide an outline of the overall text structure. Additional support is provided through headings and connectives, for example First we did..., then we did..., and finally we... .

In this study, the writing frames were used in a different way for each of two groups:

- teacher modelling - in one group, the teacher guided the group with their reading and writing, working jointly with them, helping them to compile their information from the source material. By demonstrating and modelling, the teacher showed them how to organise this information using a writing frame. The pupils produced individual work, but as a group project.
- conferencing - in the other group, the writing frames and the information sources were presented to the pupils who then compiled the report, using the writing frame. Each child produced a piece of writing and the teacher held an individual conference with each child, giving feedback and advice on how to improve their writing.

The programme of teaching covered a block of 12 lessons over a three week period. Each group worked with the teacher for one session a week. On other days, pupils worked independently on their report writing using a writing frame. In the first week, the writing frames concentrated on developing paragraphs of information drawn from one source. In the second week, pupils collected information from multiple sources and developed the writing into paragraphs with sub-headings. In the final week, pupils were expected to produce reports without using a writing frame.

To help measure the effects of the programme, the teacher assessed reports written by the pupils on the first day of the intervention using two published marking schemes; the pupils were re-assessed at the end of the intervention, again on the basis of their written reports.

The main findings of the study were:

- boys' report writing showed greater improvement when writing frames were combined with teacher modelling than when writing frames were combined with teacher conferencing - demonstrated by improved organisation and layout of the text, use of vocabulary and sentence construction
- girls' writing showed greater improvement when they had individual conferences with the teacher
- pupils in both groups enjoyed using the writing frames
- both groups felt that they had made progress using the writing frames, but whilst pupils in the teacher conferencing group felt they had improved a little, pupils in the teacher modelling group felt their writing had improved a lot and they were writing much more.

More details about writing frames can be found at:
www.warwick.ac.uk/staff/D.J.Wray/Articles/stories.pdf

Reference:
This research project was commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency as part of the Teacher Research Grant Scheme 1996/7 and was written by Steve Adderley, Castleway Primary School, Wirral.

Improving spelling confidence

We chose this case study because it provides an example of how a teacher with high, but realistic expectations of her class used a spelling strategy to boost her pupils' self-esteem. The study focused on seven Year 6 pupils who displayed haphazard spelling, low self esteem, little enthusiasm for writing and below average writing skills. These pupils were identified as failing to make as much progress as their peers. They were taught literacy with a group of seven Year 5 pupils who had similar attitudes and ability.

The pupils were taught to use a different specific way of learning spelling - the Dilt "magical spelling" or visual memory strategy. The strategy is based on the way 'good' spellers spell. Good spellers write or think of a word and then check it against a 'dictionary' they have in their visual memory. If the word is the same as the one in their 'visual dictionary' they get a feeling that tells them it is correct.

The "magical spelling strategy" formed part of the spelling focus within the literacy hour several times each week. The teacher taught five or six spellings a week using the following format:

- the teacher held a card with the correct spelling written in lower case letters
- the pupils imagined something 'good' whilst looking at the word
- the teacher then held the card to her left and encouraged the pupils to look at the spelling, whilst maintaining the good feelings
- the teacher slowly removed the card from view, but encouraged the pupils to keep picturing the word
- the procedure was repeated, but when the card was removed, the pupils were asked to write down the word
- next they were asked to decide whether they thought they had spelled the word correctly
- finally the pupils checked the word, marking each correct letter with a tick - helping the pupils to reflect on the "hard spots" within mis-spelt words and giving pupils the opportunity of analysing where his/her particular spelling difficulties lay.

The pupils were also given dictations to assess their spelling accuracy and emphasise the good feeling being promoted within the magical spelling sessions.

The teacher reported improved enthusiasm from the group - the pupils became increasingly positive about the literacy hour and much more willing to write.

The children reported feeling much more positive about learning spelling. For example, one girl before the

study had said:

- I'm a mediocre speller. It sometimes worries me. I may not get a good job if I don't spell well. If there are lots of mistakes in my work I feel ashamed.

At the end of the study, the same girl said:

- I like learning my spellings the new way - magical spelling. It's easier to remember them. I can see the words in the air.

The teacher thought the spelling strategy contributed to the pupils' improved self- esteem and performance because:

- the strategy emphasised to the pupils that they were acquiring a very effective strategy for learning to spell - they believed it was helping them
- marking their own spellings gave the pupils responsibility for their own learning
- having only five or six words to learn meant the pupils felt they were succeeding more often, reinforcing their belief that the method was working.

Previously, feedback in the form of weekly spelling tests had had a demoralising effect on these pupils and did not help them identify their weaknesses.

Factors other than the specific spelling strategy may also have played a part in increasing the pupils' confidence. For example, the teachers' enthusiasm for the project and belief in the strategy, the smaller group size, and the more relaxed atmosphere may all have helped to make the strategy effective. Also the teacher's aims were limited to improving current performance rather than pursuing more ambitious targets.

Reference:
This Best Practice Research Scholarship (BPRS) research project was written by Anne Howells, Cumwhinton Primary School, Carlisle. *Improving classroom practice - Focus Spelling* Level 1 (30 Dec 2002) Level 2 (28 Dec 2002).

School factors that help children learn to read

We have chosen to present the following case study because it illustrates the core elements of a whole-school reading programme and highlights a number of school factors which are related to children's reading achievement. These may help teachers design and implement strategies for maximising pupils' success with reading in their own schools. The study describes an intervention strategy devised by teachers in a middle school in Northampton for their Year 5 pupils.

The reading programme consisted of:

- a reading contract, signed by all parents, teachers and pupils
- a reading diary for communication between home and school
- reading summary grids - individual reading development programmes aimed at achieving specific improvements, which were based on screening, reading interviews and diagnostic programmes
- planned curriculum reading activities, such as studies on specific authors, enhanced opportunities to discuss reading with peers and teachers and lessons on finding reading material
- regular supervised library sessions, including shared oral reading sessions and use of computer software
- specialist activities targeted at pupils with a reading age 6-24 months below their actual age, such as decoding text groups, prediction opportunities, vocabulary building and strategies for matching interest with print readability.

The teachers involved in this study identified several school factors that influenced children's success in

reading. These included:

- pupils' self-esteem and the pervading attitude of peers
- teachers' enthusiasm, which affected pupils' motivation and peer culture
- opportunities for structured reading experiences, targeted towards individual children
- teachers' knowledge of how children learn to read, how to intervene, how to record and how to manage the reading process
- learning and/or other developmental difficulties
- pre-reading experience and early exposure to the reading process
- high level of access to IT-based reading opportunities, particularly for boys.

Reference:
This research project was commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency as part of the Teacher Research Grant Scheme 1996/7 and was co-ordinated and written by Alison Hawkes, Mereway Middle School, Northampton.
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Further reading

Books
Bruner, J. (1986) Actual Minds, Possible Worlds. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
Wray, D. and Lewis, M. (1995). Developing Children's Non-fiction Writing. Leamington Spa: Scholastic. Writing frames are described in this book.

Wray, D., Medwell, J., Poulson, L., & Fox, R. (2001) Teaching literacy effectively in the primary school . London: Routledge

Flynn, N. & Stainthorp, R. (2006) The learning and teaching of reading and writing. Chichester:Wiley

Graves, D.H. (1983) Writing: teachers and children at work. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Our summary identified knowledge of the process approach to writing as an important finding of the research. Graves identified the following key components of the process approach:
o Ownership: the child chooses what to write about and writes in his/her own style
o Drafting: revisions are made by the child to the writing, in response to comments made by the teacher or peers
o Conferencing: suggestions given by the teacher to the child whilst the child is writing, focusing on just one aspect each time, such as using dialogue Publishing - on the wall or in class made books etc to convey the message that writers write for an audience
o Teacher modelling: teachers writing on large sheets of paper etc., whilst verbalising their actions, so that children can hear the thinking process as well as see the written product.

Online resources
National Literacy Trust http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/
The Literacy Trust has a comprehensive website providing further information on all aspects of literacy.
National Reading Campaign: community literacy projects
http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/community.html
For examples of community literacy projects.
DCSF Standards site: Story Sacks
http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement/pics/pics_storysacks/
'Story Sacks' projects are an excellent way of encouraging parents and carers to get involved in developing

both their own literacy skills and those of their children.

Children's Story Writing http://www.midlandit.co.uk/education/
The story writing website gives helpful tips for how parents can help Key Stage 2 pupils write stories. The site also includes an interactive guide to writing a story and a library of stories written by children.
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Appraisal

Robustness

All three of these studies examined characteristics of effective literacy instruction in primary schools. Study 1 focused on teaching strategies used by teachers identified as outstanding. Study 2 built on this research and extended it from just one region to five different states in order to avoid location bias (for example local pressures such as particular tests and curriculum guidelines) and hence extend the generalisability of the findings.

Study 3 took a different, or more inclusive approach by collecting data about school and classroom factors (for example parental links, collaborative practices) as well as teacher factors. Studies 1 and 2 involved only Grade 1 teachers and students. Study 3 included teachers and students from grades 1, 2 and 3 and focused on high poverty schools.

Sampling, data collection and analysis are well described in the three studies. Although all initially selected the effective teachers and schools through nomination or reputation, final samples were selected only after their effectiveness had been empirically established by the researchers. In each case observational measures were collected, quantified and analysed and triangulated by interview data. In studies 1 and 2 observers looked at teaching processes, student reading and writing and student engagement.

Standardised reading tests were also used. In study 3, students were tested individually on measures of reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension. Data were collected about every aspect of classroom activity and teachers kept a log of their daily instructional activities. Questionnaires and interviews were also used to elicit school factors that were analysed alongside the teacher factors. The researchers used multivariate analysis to explore the relationship between school effectiveness and classroom instruction.

The findings in studies 1 and 2 illustrate the complexity of primary literacy teaching. Effective teachers:

- integrated skills with high-quality reading and writing experiences
- used high density teaching (multiple goals in one lesson)
- made extensive use of scaffolding
- encouraged student self-regulation
- had high expectations for all students
- were skilled classroom managers
- were aware of their own practices and the goals underlying them.

(Study 1)

Effective teachers:

- had excellent classroom management skills, based on positive reinforcement and co-operation
- balanced teaching of skills, literature and writing
- used scaffolding and differentiation (matched task demands to student competence)
- encouraged student self-regulation
- made strong cross-curricular connections.

(Study 2)

In study 3, the researchers found that students spending time in small groups was an important characteristic of effective teaching. Effective schools used a collaborative model which allowed the classroom teacher to work together with ESL and/or SEN teachers to enable small group instruction. Other characteristics of effective teaching were:

- coaching (scaffolding, structuring comments, probing)
- explicit phonics instruction
- time spent in independent reading
- strong home communication
- higher level questioning.

Statistically significant school factors included:

- strong links to parents
- positive and friendly environment
- good communication and collaboration between colleagues
- systematic assessment of pupil progress.

It is possible to look across the three studies for evidence about the ways in which in which demonstrably excellent teachers teach, with additional evidence from study 3 about the settings in which they are enabled to teach effectively. In effect the three studies create a ladder, starting with a localised study of effective teaching of literacy with nine teachers in one region; moving on to 30 teachers in five different regions and followed by a study which looks at school characteristics as well as teacher characteristics. (Although this is not the chronological order of the studies)

Relevance

Although the studies are based in the US, the findings have the capacity to interest all teachers of literacy to young children. They are certainly of relevance to current initiatives and debates about literacy teaching. The finding in study 3 about small group (as opposed to whole class) teaching may be controversial.

Applicability

Study 1 is well illustrated with examples of effective teachers' classroom interactions. Study 2 has a useful appendix which describes the teaching behaviours and characteristics of the most effective teachers and study 3 contains a number of quotes and illustrations. All of this will help teachers in England make the contextual leap to their own situations.

Writing

Studies 1 and 2 are clear, readable and relatively jargon free. Study 3 contains a series of statistical tables and textual references with which it is unlikely that teacher readers will want to engage. However the findings and conclusions are clearly set out, with sufficient context and pedagogical detail to engage the interest of even the most non-statistically minded reader.

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