Implementation, Successes, and Limitations of the Literacy Hour as Actively Observed in an English Primary School

Jamie Marie Pratt

University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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Appendix D - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Jamie Pratt
College: Education
Department: Holistic Teaching + Learning
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Colleen Gilrane

PROJECT TITLE: Implementation, Successes, and Limitations of the Literacy Hour as Actively Observed in an English Primary School

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Colleen P. Gilrane, Faculty Mentor
Date: 5/4/00

Comments (Optional):

thoughtful and well done!
Implementation, Successes and Limitations of the Literacy Hour as Actively Observed in an English Primary School

Jamie Pratt
Spring 2000

Mentor: Dr. Colleen Gilrane
Implementation, Successes and Limitations of the Literacy Hour as Actively Observed in an English Primary School

Abstract

This paper includes a review of literature on reading education, the National Literacy Strategy implemented in the United Kingdom in 1998 and a brief summary of recent literacy education movements in the United States. The implementation, successes and limitations of the Literacy Hour, a part of the National Literacy Strategy, is considered based on the observation of two primary school classrooms in an English primary school. Although no specific teaching method has been proved to be “the best” by educational research, methods found to be successful in this study include encouraging students to do imaginative, independent work and then displaying their work.
Implementation, Successes and Limitations of the Literacy Hour as Actively Observed in an English Primary School

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Appendixes

I. Interview with Teachers
II. National Literacy Strategy
Introduction

This paper examines England’s new National Literacy Strategy, exploring its elements and purposes and its implementation as observed in two specific primary school classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

This study attempts to understand the rationale for and success of the current literacy pedagogy in England’s primary schools. In addition, the study describes and reflects upon the methods two specific teachers used to implement the new National Literacy Strategy.

Significance of the Study

Literacy is a fundamental skill of much concern to educators. Understanding how different educators attempt to teach literacy and to what extent they are successful is beneficial for teachers of literacy.
Review of the Literature

The Reading Process

Hawkins (1991) claims that most researchers agree reading is a “multi-faceted process” (p. 169). Adding to the complexity of the reading process, all of these facets operate simultaneously. These facets include word-decoding operations such as phonics and reading prediction skills such as the semantic (the meaning of a word) and syntactic (structure of the language or grammar) cue systems. Further, readers use schemata of previously experienced texts to make predictions about a new text.

No single facet can be clearly argued as the most important. As Hawkins states, “Although no one would argue that phonetic interpretation of the written symbol is not a part of reading, there are not too many people who believe that it constitutes the whole, or even the most important part, of the reading process” (p. 171). One research study of reading miscues, or meaningful reading errors, indicated that increased decoding ability does not correlate with greater reading accuracy (McLaughin 1987b and McLeod & McLaughlin 1986).

Several approaches to teaching reading are common. These include basal readers, the language experience approach and the literature-based approach. Basal readers are based on a belief that reading is a “bottom-up process” rather than a multifaceted activity. Decoding or phonics skills are emphasized, and vocabulary is controlled and presented sequentially. Thus, basal readers do not reflect the current research that reading is a more complex process. The language experience approach and the literature-based approach correspond with the research better. For the language experience approach, students, even pre-literate students, produce the texts used for study. Therefore, the students’
vocabulary is what is studied. Decoding skills can thus be taught in a context personally meaningful to students. The literature-based approach uses quality children's literature as the text for study and a method of bringing meaningful context to the students' reading study (Hawkins, 1991).

**Literacy Education in the United Kingdom: The National Literacy Strategy**

Recently, British researchers have emphasized the importance of improving basic literacy and numeracy skills. A correlation has been made between Britain's lack of academic achievement and economic failings. Although it is debated if educational reform will improve these conditions, a Literacy Task Force was established in 1996 to investigate how to improve literacy education (Reynolds, 1998).

Based on the findings of the Literacy Task Force, the Department for Education and Employment, led by David Blunkett, Education Secretary, implemented the National Literacy Strategy in the fall of 1998 (Aaronovitch, p. 3). The main aim of the strategy is to improve test scores on literacy. Specifically, the Government wants at least 80% of eleven-year olds to achieve the standards of literacy expected by them in the year 2002 (Department for Education and Employment, p. ii).

The National Literacy Strategy is based on the principle that there are four main methods students can use to understand a text: phonics, grammatical knowledge, word recognition and graphic knowledge and knowledge of context. Particularly, the strategy emphasizes the importance of phonics, citing unnamed research proving that children must be taught how to decode words and to recognize that they are made of letters combined in certain patterns and corresponding with specific sounds. Therefore, the strategy asserts that children must be taught these skills from a young age so that they do
not become over-reliant on context and grammar and are, thus, more able to handle more complex, extended texts. Further, the strategy suggests that students in the early stages use a “carefully balanced programme of guided reading from books of graded difficulty level” (Department for Education and Employment, p. 4). For writing the strategy emphasizes the importance of learning proper spelling and grammar and developing legible handwriting.

The Literacy Hour was developed as a method for teachers to use to implement the National Literacy Strategy. Previous inspection evidence shows that primary schools typically spend approximately five hours of instruction time on literacy per week so the Literacy Hour was designed to be a one-hour lesson everyday. Although the Government encourages teachers to employ a wide range of methods, the Literacy Hour has a rather strict format for daily instruction. The focus is on whole class and small group instruction instead of individual instruction. The reasoning is that if students are taught individually, they receive an average of five or six minutes of instruction time per week. As students progress, individual differences become more pronounced and lower ability students only receive fragmented attention (Department for Education and Employment, p. 10).

The structure of the Literacy Hour begins with fifteen minutes of a whole class activity of shared reading or writing. During this time, for instance, the class may read from a “big book” or collaborate to compose a text. The next fifteen minutes is to be devoted to a whole class activity on word or sentence level work which emphasizes spelling and phonics skills. For the following twenty minutes, the class should engage in small group and independent work. The teacher should divide the class into small groups
differentiated by ability and meet with each group at least once a week for a guided reading or writing activity. The students not meeting with the teacher should be occupied with independent work. During the remaining ten minutes of the Literacy Hour, the class should come together to review and reflect on the lesson.

To effectively implement the National Literacy Strategy, teachers are provided with a detailed list of goals for each term of every year. These goals are divided into three groups: word level, sentence level and text level. Teachers are encouraged to carefully construct lesson plans that follow these goals. In addition, they are expected to integrate literacy across other curriculums.

The implementation of the National Literacy Strategy has created a good deal of controversy in English education. Critics argue that it limits student imagination and leaves out time for creative writing, work on extended texts such as novels and reduces time for other subjects (Marshall, p. 2). However, proponents of the strategy refer to recent test results showing an improvement in literacy scores and a recent survey indicating that an overwhelming majority of headteachers support the plan and believe it is improving literacy at their schools (Morris). A December 1999 report ("National literacy strategy having less impact on writing than reading, says OfSTED") shows that the number of students reaching the government goal on the standardized national test rose by six percentage points to 70 percent in 1999. However, the results also indicate a worrisome discrepancy in the scores of male and female students; males are scoring eight to fifteen percentage points lower than females. Further, the results indicate that literacy teaching has generally improved during the implementation of the National Literacy
Strategy, but phonics instruction is still weak, particularly in years three and four (American grades three and four).

Although compliance with the National Literacy Strategy is voluntary, ninety-nine percent of English schools have implemented the plan under pressure from the Government and the local education authorities (Judd, p. 8). How strictly teachers follow the structure of the Literacy Hour varies widely. The general consensus is that each teacher must adapt the structure to fit his or her own style and classroom.

The highly structured National Literacy Strategy is restrictive to some teachers while others appreciate it as a valuable guide. Nonetheless, the plan will most likely remain controversial as the Government continues its attempt to reform English education and improve basic skills by implementing a similar numeracy strategy to improve math skills.

Recent Policy Changes in American Literacy Education

Allington and Woodside-Jiron (1999) summarized the causes of recent literacy education reform in the United States, especially state curriculum changes in California and Texas. In recent years, there has been increasing legislation dictating early reading instruction. In California and Texas, advocates of a phonics-emphasis curriculum have been successful in affecting curriculum legislation. They base their claims on a white paper document entitled *30 Years of Research: What We Now Know About How Children Learn to Read* which makes seven recommendations for effective reading instruction: 1. Begin teaching phonemic awareness directly at an early age (kindergarten); 2. Teach each sound-spelling correspondence explicitly; 3. Teach frequent, highly regular sound-spelling relationships systematically; 4. Show children exactly how to sound out
words; 5. Use connected, decodeable text for children to practice the sound-spelling relationships they learn; 6. Use interesting stories to develop language comprehension; 7. Balance, but don’t mix. These recommendations mostly cite research sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. As Allington and Woodside-Jiron poignantly explain, this research does not actually support the recommendations because it was conducted almost entirely on children with learning disabilities concerning phonological awareness and because the results are reliable only for pronunciation but not for word reading, fluency and prose comprehension.

Like the National Literacy Strategy in the United Kingdom, advocates of the new educational policies in California and Texas are attempting to prescribe specifically how teachers should instruct students to read. However, as the director of NICHD research, G. Reid Lyon addressed to Congress in 1997, “We have learned that no single method, approach, or philosophy for teaching reading is equally effective for all children … (p. 10). The real question is which children need what, when, for how long, with what type of instruction, and in what type of setting. (p. 12)” (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999, p. 10).
Methods and Procedures

Procedures

Two classrooms were observed one week each. Informal interviews were conducted with the teachers of both classrooms regarding their approach to literacy education.

The Participants

The participants in the study are two English primary school teachers and their classes. Both teachers teach at the same school in a small northwest English town.

Analysis of the Data

Based on the conducted informal observations and interviews, a description was written of the literacy education in each classroom and reported in the “Results” section of this paper.
Results

The primary school visited is a semi-open plan school in a small town in northwest England. As a semi-open plan school, there are no doors on the classrooms. Also, the middle of the school is a common area that serves as a lounge and school library. The staff uses this area to work with individual and small groups of students. Partly as a result of the semi-open floor plan, the school has close-knit atmosphere. Each morning, the entire school gathers in the cafeteria/gym for assembly. The staff rotates who will lead the assembly, a time for group worship, reading, singing or class presentations. Following assembly, the staff takes a thirty-minute coffee break while the students are all allowed to play outside together. Again, the staff rotates the responsibility of supervising the students. Because of the school’s positive reputation, many parents enrolled their children at this school, causing overcrowded classes. The average class size had reached near forty by June 1999, the month the school was visited. Most of the classrooms are fairly small. Students sit around tables in groups of approximately four to six. Most supplies are shared by students. Students use few textbooks. Rather, they construct their own journals for each subject where they record their work. Historically, the school has had high literacy test results.
Classroom A

Teacher A was working in a year four (American fourth grade) classroom with thirty-seven students as of June 17, 1999. The year had been her first full time teaching job in many years. She received her teacher training twenty-five years earlier but had not taught when she had her children. Most recently, she had worked for nine years as a supply (substitute) teacher.

Probably because she was teaching full time for the first time in so many years, teacher A enjoyed the structure of the Literacy Hour and followed it closely. In fact, teacher A cites her lack of experience teaching full time and teaching year four as her challenge to teaching literacy. In her classroom, she approached curriculum as fact; she appeared to be teaching students what skills they needed to correctly interpret the text and produce writing. The focus of her Literacy Hour lessons was a commercial activity book designed for the Literacy Hour. In addition to the hour spent each morning on the Literacy Hour, teacher A designated a “silent” reading time after lunch where students read individually while the teacher took turns listening to them.

In her classroom, teacher A had divided the class into six reading and three literacy levels. Group composition was determined by referring to the students’ previous teachers’ records and by listening to the students read. Less people were assigned to the lower ability groups. Since the Literacy Hour emphasizes whole class and small group instruction, teacher A attempts to teach the range of ability in her levels by aiming for the average level. However, for the lower ability students, she tries to provide extra help. When meeting with the small groups, teacher A practices guided reading. She believes there are more benefits of than problems with guided reading because it provides students
with the opportunity to learn from each other, not just the teacher and to acquire social
skills such as listening and taking turns.

The books in teacher’s A classroom included a basal activity book and reading
books graded by their difficulty level. The school picked the activity book which presents
short texts in a variety of forms with exercises specifically focusing on the word, sentence
and text level goals for year four. The literature books in the classroom are picked by
teachers. Each year, a publishing company sends a pack to the schools. Teacher A
selects books based on the physical quality of the book (e.g. prefers hardback) and the
quality of the story. Students are to expected to read books on their assigned level until
they reach level ten or eleven when they can choose from any of the books. In addition,
the school requires that the teachers cover one additional book each term. The teacher
can select the book.

Teacher A believes the greatest motivator and most effective method for teaching
literacy is sharing the intrinsic value and personal interest and excitement in books. She
also values a mixture of teaching approaches, using both whole language and direct
instruction methods. However, she was not able to incorporate literacy across other
subject areas. Students are assessed in their progression in reading by being listened to
once a week by the teacher. For literacy, their class work is marked daily. Further,
national tests are administered once a year.

Based on school records, teacher A claims the class’s progress has grown by leaps
and bounds during the year. The Literacy Hour has facilitated their progress. Although it
is regimented, causing the teacher to constantly watch the clock, it exposes students to a
wide variety of books.
Teacher A was carefully implementing the details of the Literacy Hour in her classroom. However, the students did not appear to be particularly motivated or challenged during the week observed. Each Literacy Hour lesson that week focused on one text selection about birds from the activity book. The lesson would always begin with a collaborative reading or review of the story. Teacher A would ask the same basic comprehension questions each day yet only received little or incorrect student response. Further, the students did barely any work during their independent work time scheduled while the teacher met with a small group. For four days, they answered the word, sentence and text level assignments in the activity book for a total of approximately fifteen short answer questions. During the time for independent study, students worked quite slowly, wasting a good deal of time. They spent their time chatting, getting out supplies and arguing over erasers, failing to respond to teacher requests to work quietly. Further, during “silent” reading, many students talked rather than read. Several students appeared unable to read much at all. Overall, the atmosphere in classroom A during the week observed was repetitive and not challenging or motivating.
Classroom B

Teacher B has been teaching at the school for several years. In addition to her regular classroom duties, she serves as the deputy headteacher and the literacy coordinator of the school. The walls of her classroom are covered with outstanding student produced art and writing. The shelves are lined with books; many are award-winning literature books. Teacher B has a mixed class of forty students. Most are year six (American - sixth grade) students; the rest are the oldest students from the year five (American - fifth grade) class.

Teacher B believes in using a single book as the basis for all language and literacy teaching. As the literacy coordinator, she started the story topic approach to literacy education at the school which requires teachers to cover one book per term. Further, teacher B finds art an effective medium for teaching literacy because it is stimulating and makes children talk. She believes asking students to create their own books and displays motivates them for literacy education.

Teacher B divided the class into five reading groups based on student ability level. She meets with each group once a week for a guided reading activity. For the special needs students, she meets with them three times a week. Instead of trying to adjust her lesson for the varying abilities, teacher B believes in differentiation by outcome; students will do what they can for an activity. However, she does provide extra help with special needs students. She assesses student progress by looking at their work on a regular basis. In addition, her students must also take the national tests.

When asked about the Literacy hour, teacher B immediately declared she hated it. She finds it restrictive and does not believe it has helped her school because the school
was already successful at teaching English. She did concede that it may help schools and teachers who struggle with teaching reading.

During the week observed, it was difficult to determine when teacher B was doing the Literacy Hour although the class did several literacy activities. The student work displayed in the room was impressive. All of the students seemed to be able to produce creative writing, including poetry. They took pride in their work, recopying all of it in beautiful handwriting then illustrating their writing. Some of the literacy activities observed in classroom B included writing a journal of experiences of a recent overnight class trip, writing ten descriptive sentences or poetry lines about a seashell and writing a dialogue between two characters in *Bridge to Terabithia*, the book being used for the current term. Teacher B emphasized student creativity and independent thinking across curriculums. She used no textbooks or teacher manuals.
Conclusion

The Literacy Hour provides teachers with an outline for how to teach basic literacy skills. However, many teachers criticize it for not leaving time for more creative, extended activities. With more practice, hopefully teachers will learn how to balance the requirements of the Literacy Hour with more imaginative work and how to integrate literacy education with other subjects. Based on the observations conducted in this study, students seem more motivated and productive when encouraged to use their imaginations and produce independent work. Displaying their work further motivated students to do well.

Recommendations for Further Research

More research needs to be done on the recent history of literacy education in English primary schools, the theoretical and research basis of the National Literacy Strategy, and reactions from teachers to the new plan.
References


National literacy strategy having less impact on writing than reading, says OfSTED. (1999). M2 Communications Ltd.

Appendix I:
Interviews with Teachers
Interview with Mrs. Somerfield, Year 4  
Thursday, June 17, 1999

1. How long have you been teaching?

   Received training 25 years ago. Teaching full time for first time after 9 years of supply teaching.

2. How many different reading/literacy levels do you have in your class?

   6 reading levels and 3 literacy levels

3. How are the reading groups divided?

   Divided by seeing previous teacher's records and listening to reading (by ability). Less people in lower ability groups

4. How do you assess the children's development in reading/literacy?

   Reading - listening to students read at least once a week
   Literacy - following work in class (marked daily)
   National tests once a year

5. What methods seem particularly good for helping children improve reading ability/literacy?

   Sharing excitement of an personal interest in books

6. What particular challenges do you face teaching literacy this year?

   First year teaching this grade
   First year teaching full time in a long time.

7. How do you feel the class size (37 as of 6/17/99) and close proximity of the students affect your teaching and the students' learning?

   Works well; prefers to have students sit in pairs, but there's not enough room


   School picked. Basal developed based on literacy hour requirements which state goals for each half term at the text, sentence, and word level.
   School also requires a book (teacher's choice) for each term
9. What do you think about the whole language vs. direct instruction approach to teaching literacy?

Mixture best. Don’t think there is just one approach. Show children they can use skills in a variety of situations.

10. How has the literacy hour affected your teaching and the students’ learning?

Regimented - watch clock.
Good though because expose children to a variety of books.

11. How do you teach to the different ability levels?

Aim for average level. Give extra help to lower abilities (e.g. written worksheet, extra input from teacher on first day, review of reading 2nd day)

12. How do you select literature books for the classroom?

Publishing company sends pack to school for teachers to look at at the beginning of the year. Teachers select books based on book quality (hardback best) and story quality

13. Are there any guidelines/restrictions for the students to select books for silent reading?

Yes. There are book levels. Once get to 10 or 11, can pretty much pick anything (free reading).

14. What do you think the benefits/problems are with guided reading?

More benefits than problems. Learn social skills of taking turns and listening. Learn from each other as opposed to just from the teacher.

15. How do you motivate the students for literacy?

Intrinsic value - cover variety of books, share interest and excitement

16. How do you incorporate other subjects with literacy?

Haven’t this year.

17. How would you rate the class’s overall progress this year?

Grown by leaps and bounds (based on school records). Literacy hour has helped.
Interview with Mrs. Shenton, Year 5 and 6
June 18, 1999

1. Please describe your approach to teaching literacy.

   One book basis for all language and literacy
   Reading groups - read once a week; special needs - 3 times a week

2. What are your responsibilities as a literacy coordinator?

   Influence reaching in the school (story topic approach)

3. What are your responsibilities as deputy head?

   Order stock, serves as headmaster when headmaster gone, influence curriculum

4. How do you like teaching a mixed 5th and 6th year class?

   Works fine. Year 5’s have risen to the occasion. (Year 5’s the oldest in their year.)

5. With so many students (40), how do you differentiate your lessons for different skill levels?

   Differentiation by outcome
   Extra help with special needs

6. How do you motivate your students for literacy?

   Students make own books and displays.

7. How do you select books for the classroom/reading?

   Award-winning

8. How do you assess your students’ progress in literacy?

   Look at work - teacher assessment
   National test - levels

9. What activities do you find particularly useful for teaching literacy?

   Art because it is stimulating, makes students talk
10. How many reading groups are there?

5

11. How are the reading groups divided?

By ability

12. What challenges have you faced teaching literacy this year?

Hate literacy hour - is restrictive

13. How has the implementation of the literacy hour affected your teaching and the students' learning?

Not helped this school because it is good at teaching English.
May helps schools/teachers who struggle with teaching reading.
Appendix II:
National Literacy Strategy