The Early Literacy Support Programme (ELS) and the blend and clash of national educational policy ideologies in England

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In this article we consider the development of key policy issues in England, related to the area of literacy learning and children who are considered to have difficulties in literacy in their early years. We trace the tensions which have arisen since the 1980s between different policies and practices in these areas. These tensions include pressures to raise standards of literacy and to support children with difficulties, and the establishment of a prescribed curriculum for young children. In particular, we focus on the blend and clash of national educational policy ideals in areas related to literacy and children who have been categorised as having 'special educational needs', and how these have influenced the development of the Early Literacy Support Programme (ELS) (DfES, 2001a; 2001b). This is a programme set up by the Department for Education and Science in England for children in Year 1, aged 5 to 6 years old.

Keywords: Early Literacy Support Programme; Inclusive pedagogy; Foundation Stage Curriculum; Reading Recovery; National Literacy Strategy; Early intervention

The early 1990s and the emerging tensions

The tensions inherent in national educational policy ideals in areas related to literacy and children who have been categorised as having 'special educational needs', and their influence on the development of the Early Literacy Support Programme (ELS), can be traced back to their origins in the development of the National Curriculum in England during the late 1980s. The implementation of the National Curriculum in 1988 marginalised the previous influential discourse of the ‘whole curriculum’ which had been developed since 1977 by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate in England and Wales (Maw, 1993). The National Curriculum heralded the introduction of a centralised, subject-driven and assessment-based curriculum for children in the first years of primary school. These changes to the conceptualisation and delivery of the
curriculum challenged the dominant view of the curriculum for primary school children, which had emphasised the need to cater for individuals and diversity through the use of ‘progressive’ and ‘child-centred’ pedagogical approaches.

The move to a prescriptive primary curriculum also raised tensions around the education of children who experienced difficulties in learning. The implementation of a National Curriculum placed question marks over children’s fundamental inalienable right to access to the curriculum of their peers if they experienced difficulties in learning. This issue arose because the centralised, subject-based and assessment-driven nature of the National Curriculum created difficulties for catering for individual differences and needs. As Peter (1995) noted, the appearance of the 1988 Education Reform Bill marginalised pupils identified as having ‘special educational needs’, as this Bill contained only one reference to them and one reference to special schools. Furthermore it could be seen to be moving away from the encouragement of integration seen in the 1981 Act, in that it ‘promoted a market forces approach which ran counter to coherent provision for children with disabilities and learning difficulties’ and the creation of ‘league tables of achievements in which children with learning difficulties would be seen to fail’ (Peter, 1995, p. 44). Yet, whilst there was an implicit marginalisation of pupils with disabilities and learning difficulties, the documentation also acknowledged that they had the right to participate in the ‘broad and balanced’ National Curriculum and its associated curriculum-based assessments. The tensions that arose as a result of pressures for both marginalisation and inclusion were implicit in policies formulated in the late 1980s and can be linked to the inconsistencies between the need to support the learning of all pupils and the desire to implement a prescriptive curriculum based on assessment.

These tensions were intensified by a downward pressure for the assessment of younger children arising from the introduction of the National Curriculum and the emergence of a highly publicised debate over literacy standards in the early 1990s. The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced statutory national testing in the primary school at age 7 and 11. It also initiated an inspection system which was controlled by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). These developments contributed to a set of restraints that Ball (1990) has identified as implicit in the implementation of the National Curriculum. The public debates over ‘falling reading standards’ in the early 1990s led to the public acceptance that standards were falling and a growing consensus that steps needed to be taken to replace the use of ‘progressive’ methods with a formal, skills-based focus upon the basics in literacy. This can be seen to have helped continue the process where teachers were ‘reduced to agents of policies which are decided elsewhere’ (Ball, 1990, p. 171).

The public debate in the early 1990s was initiated in England by the publication in the Times Educational Supplement of a front-page story in late June 1990, which reported that educational psychologists had found that reading standards among seven-year-olds were falling rapidly in London LEAs (see Stierer, 1994, p. 129). This story was reported in all the national English newspapers. The subsequent debate contributed to the production in 1991 of the Education, Science and Arts
Committee Report on Standards of Reading in Primary Schools (HMSO, 1991), which expressed a concern over the Inspectorate’s findings that in 20% of schools the ‘work in reading was judged to be poor and required urgent attention’ (HMSO, 1991, vol. 1, p. ix). The publication in December 1991 of these ‘first nationwide tests of seven year olds in England and Wales, which showed that more than a quarter had difficulty in reading’ (Willman and Smith, 1992, p. 1), led to a battle between the two main political parties. The Conservative government and Labour opposition front bench both rushed out rival plans to improve reading standards during the period immediately preceding the 1992 election (Willman and Smith, 1992). The overriding and continual concern in these debates and the research they generated was the development and assessment of the most up-to-date and correct way of teaching literacy skills to children in the early years (Soler, 2002; Soler and Openshaw, 2002).

The resulting changes from the introduction of the National Curriculum and the concern over literacy standards occurred at the same time as the overhaul of existing systems for the identification and assessment of children who experience difficulties in learning. The 1992 Audit Commission Report found that there was a discrepancy in the provision and services offered to children around the country with learning difficulties or disabilities. This led to a prescriptive centralisation of the identification and assessment process as described in the subsequent Code of Practice on the Identification on the Assessment of Pupils with Special Educational Needs (DfE, 1994). The late 1980s and early 1990s therefore saw the development of strong pressures for a uniform, centralised, standardised assessment and delivery of both curricula and provision for children who experience difficulties in learning or have disabilities.

The mid-to-late 1990s: increasing tensions and contradictions

The mid to late 1990s was a period marked by the increased tensions and ensuing struggles between child-centred, individualised approaches and the development of a ‘central concern’ by curriculum policy makers over the ‘behaviour of teachers in the classroom’; an ‘assumption abroad that change was necessary’ which was accompanied by a common consensus that literacy standards were low and falling; and finally that it was possible to bring about change and address falling standards through the ‘science’ and ‘technology of teaching’ (Coldron and Smith, 1999, pp. 306–307).

By the mid 1990s the focus upon raising standards and the resulting tensions between the need to address ‘special educational needs’ issues while promoting the education for all children became even more evident and entrenched in policies related to ‘special educational needs’. This led to a contradiction where it had become routine to identify the existence of an apparent contradiction in policy, with schools being encouraged to drive up standards and raise attainment while at the same time delivering greater inclusively. As Dyson and Millard note, these ‘potentially contradictory policy imperatives’ presented schools and teachers with
a dilemma and raised the question of how schools and teachers could ‘retain an inclusive profile while at the same time surviving in a competitive educational environment’ (Didaskalou and Millward, 2002, p. 112).

The Green Paper, ‘Excellence for all children, meeting special educational needs’ (DfEE, 1997), acknowledged the Literacy Task Force recommendation for ‘developing strategies to enable parents and schools to work together in supporting the literacy achievements of children with SEN’ (DfEE, 1997, Section 13, p. 15). This paper was the first government document to mention the notion of ‘inclusion’ as opposed to ‘integration’. In the introduction to the document the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, Rt Hon. David Blunkett, wrote about the ‘vision’ of inclusion:

Our vision is of excellence for all. This inclusive vision encompasses children with special educational needs. (DfEE, 1997, p. 4)

The Green Paper also acknowledges the need for early intervention in order to ‘reduce the need for expensive intervention later on’, and argues that ‘for some children, giving more effective attention to early signs of difficulties can prevent the development of SEN’ (DfEE, 1997, p. 13, Section 5). There is a stated policy commitment by the DfEE to reduce the amount of pupils who require statements of their special educational needs (DfEE, 1997).

The 1990s also marked a period when literacy standards became a central concern in public thinking and governmental policy with the development of educational policy initiatives such as the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998). Developments in these literacy policy initiatives have been heavily influenced by academics and researchers working in the field of School Effectiveness. It has been argued that School Effectiveness Research embodies a constrained agenda which ‘is set within the limits of a positivistic epistemology which reduces structures to atomised individuals and schools’ (Thrupp, 2001, p. 445). This technicist agenda can be seen to underpin the key documents designed to present or implement current educational policy in England during the 1990s. School Effectiveness Research tends to stress policies directed at increasing levels of attainment in the ‘basics’ and outcomes rather than critically debating the nature of the school curriculum, and stresses school solutions rather than taking into account broader social structures (Thrupp, 2001). This approach, therefore, has the potential to lead to pedagogies which focus narrowly upon skill development, reduce professional input and autonomy through an emphasis upon external curricula and expertise, and emphasise quantifiable assessment and ‘norms’. As Norwich and Lewis point out, the generic notion of ‘effectiveness’ does ‘not address the crucial question of effective for whom’, as there is an ‘assumption that effective teaching is the same for all pupils, i.e. in effect, what works is taken as leading to effective learning for all pupils’ (Norwich and Lewis, 2001, p. 315).

The influence of School Effectiveness Research in this period also led to the adoption of whole class teaching which would directly impact upon literacy teaching practices and programmes for children who were experiencing particular difficulties with literacy development. In 1996 the Conservative government cut funding to the
New Zealand-inspired Reading Recovery Scheme (Openshaw et al., 2002), and set up the National Literacy Project (NLP). Beard states that ‘the NLP reflected many of the implications of the school effectiveness research’. The NLP was led by a senior member of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate, John Stannard, who ‘was not only very familiar with the inspection evidence of recent years but also with the findings from the school effectiveness and overseas literacy research’ (Beard, 2000, pp. 422–423).

The adoption of NLP marked a move away from the Reading Recovery Scheme, which had been supported by both main political parties in the early 1990s (Openshaw et al., 2002). Reading Recovery targets poorer readers in their first years of schooling, and provides one-to-one instruction and the training of the teacher to be an expert in early literacy learning (see, for example, Clay, 1985; 1990; 1994). The emphasis in Reading Recovery is on the training of and utilisation of specialist teachers utilising systematic observation and records to probe their students’ difficulties in learning. These Reading Recovery tutors also link with the classroom teacher in order to raise the quality of teaching in the classroom. Reading Recovery therefore focuses upon individualised tuition which in turn feeds into classroom practices and pedagogical approaches. The NLP’s emphasis was upon the management of literacy at a whole school/whole class level through monitoring by senior staff and National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)-based researchers.

The NLP also introduced a ‘Framework for Teaching’ and the Literacy Hour, which ‘were earlier versions of what were subsequently to be found in the NLS’ (Beard, 2000, p. 427). In May 1996 the Labour Party announced a back-to-basics drive to improve literacy standards if it became the government in the election to be held the following year. The Labour Party planned to raise standards through the introduction of a new literacy task force and wanted to examine ways of ensuring ‘that every child leaving primary school does so with a reading age of 11 by the end of the second term of office’ (Rafferty, 1996). As Labour education policy developed during 1997 it became clear that many of the objectives and structures of the NLP would be kept and further developed by the new Labour government. Labour Party dissatisfaction with the quality of newly trained teachers also resulted in a pledge to place greater emphasis on basic skills, classroom discipline and whole class teaching and the use of phonics (Rafferty, 1996).

On 28 February 1997 the preliminary report of the English Literacy Task force was released by the Labour government. The Literacy Taskforce Report (1997) reflected the tensions that were building between the avocation of whole class instruction for efficient, centralised control of teaching practices and the need for individual approaches to teaching reading for those who experienced difficulties in learning to read. At the beginning of the introduction to the Report, the New Zealand strategy, which utilised Reading Recovery for addressing reading difficulties, was praised as the way forward for English literacy policy. Yet in paragraph 36 at the conclusion of the section, Reading Recovery was rejected as part of ‘fleeting and unconnected initiatives’ which are difficult to implement across the range of English schools.
This tension is apparent throughout the 1997 Literacy Taskforce Report. Paragraph 45 suggested that the emphasis would be upon whole class as well as individual tuition. It stressed ‘carefully sequenced whole-class, group and individual work to focus upon strategies and skills, with the teacher combining instruction, demonstration, questioning and discussion, providing the structure for subsequent tasks and giving help and constructive response’. In the section of the document entitled ‘Children with Special Educational needs’, Reading Recovery was mentioned as providing a model for these needs. This section also noted the need for ‘an individualised learning plan’ and the role of special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) in diagnosing children’s particular needs (see Literacy Taskforce Report, 1997, paragraphs 105–106).

The release of the National Literacy Strategy, which was launched in August 1997, was followed by the Framework for Teaching (DfEE, 1998), which came into operation under a quasi-statutory status in all state primary schools in England in September 1998. This document set out the teaching objectives in literacy for pupils from reception to Year 6 and outlined the format of a Literacy Hour as a daily period of time throughout the school which would be dedicated to ‘literacy teaching time for all pupils’ (DfEE, 1998, p. 8). The tension between providing individualised instruction to cater for children experiencing difficulties in literacy and the avocation of whole class teaching was also embedded in this document. Critics argued that the Framework for Teaching could be seen to emphasise ‘interactive whole-class’ teaching, which reflected the influence of school improvement literature that had been espoused by influential members of the Literacy Taskforce (Mroz et al., 2000). There was also criticism of its lack of acknowledgement of individualised instruction and therefore a failure to cater successfully for children with special educational needs (see, for example, Byers, 1999).

The emphasis on the need for efficiency, assessment, centralisation of curricula and pedagogical control and the marginalisation of child-centred, individualised programmes and professional learning also influenced the development of curriculum policy for the early years. These years saw the initial development of the Foundation Stage Curriculum for children aged 3–5 in England, which, when it was introduced in 2000, like the 1988 National Curriculum, would represent an unprecedented attempt to centralise and prescribe curricula practices for children of this age group. This would have implications for children who experienced difficulties in learning.

Didaskalou and Millward (2002) have noted that the academic focus of the National Curriculum was not always appropriate for all pupils and contributed to the increase in pupils reported as experiencing behaviour problems at this time. The increased downward pressure on the early childhood sector, arising from the growing desire to maintain and raise ‘standards’ for all children, generated debates over curriculum and practice in the early childhood sector (Soler and Miller, 2003). These debates raised questions of how a centralised curriculum could address the needs of early years children and to what extent it should be driven by the need to link to the subject based, prescriptive, centralised National Curriculum.
The 1990s saw an increase in the tensions between the need to provide a coherent provision for children with learning difficulties, the desire to raise literacy standards and early childhood practitioners’ desires to adhere to a progressive, child-centred curriculum. Yet, despite these pressures for inclusion, the recognition of the need to cater for individual differences and pressure to maintain a child-centred approach for younger children, the NLS can be seen to have moved schools away from the liberal humanist understandings of the 1970s and early 1980s and towards stronger linkages between the curriculum, the labour market and national economic performance. The Early Literacy Support Programme (ELS) can be seen to embody these main features and approaches of the NLS.

**The ELS: embedding the dominant ideology**

The ELS programme was implemented in 2000 by the Department for Education and Skills in order to support younger pupils who experience difficulties in reading. It promotes the selection and screening for individual children’s needs, particularly those who have particular difficulties in relation to the development of reading skills. There is an implementation team consisting of the teacher, teaching assistant, special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), the literacy co-ordinator and the head-teacher, who select the children for the target group. The class teacher is responsible for monitoring progress and selecting books for the children to read and ensures that new learning in the intervention sessions is transferred into the Literacy Hour.

Once identified, however the children are taught in groups rather than individually, in 20 minutes of additional sessions which take place outside the Literacy Hour in an identified area known as the ELS area. The range of equipment to be used for the sessions is made available in files of session materials as well as a trolley of equipment to support the sessions. The ELS programme consists of a training pack for teaching assistants who are provided with daily teaching programmes on how to teach literacy for children who have been identified as requiring extra intervention to support their literacy difficulties. While the programme recognises the need for more individualised instruction and the impact of diversity in local contexts, it firmly supports whole class approaches through centrally prescribed instructional pedagogies and materials (DfES, 2001b). The programme was initially designed to:

... ensure that children receive quality first teaching in the first term, that careful screening and selection processes are employed to identify the children most at risk, and that the selected group of up to six children then receives an effective intervention (including 60 additional literacy sessions in the second term). (DfES, 2001a, p. 4)

The ELS programme can be viewed as part of the ongoing move towards a technical rationality in curriculum policy and practice which has been described in the previous sections of this article. It promotes a model where remote experts deliver apparently research validated ‘best practice’ for delivery in educational settings by practitioners who are responding to well-defined and recognisable problems.
central role of the teaching assistant and the session materials marks a further step away from child-centred, progressive-based practice, as it can be seen to reinforce the gap and hierarchical, downward movement of knowledge and pedagogy from research/expertise to implementation in educational settings.

From this viewpoint the ELS can be viewed as refinement to the overall thrust of the NLS towards a more mechanical prescribed application of procedures, and materials focus upon skill development rather than engagement with unique situations and problems associated with literacy development. This is in contrast to a socio-cultural view of literacy learning which suggests that literacy learning is not just about decoding text in individual’s minds. Rather it must be ‘conceived as a socially and culturally crafted set of practices, within which individuals are mutually dependent as they participate in activities with and around text’ (Green and Kostrogriz, 2002, p. 103).

Like the NLS the ELS programme appears to run counter to an alternative view of the professional learning process as an engagement in experimentation, evaluation and reframing, as practitioners do not have responsibility for reflecting upon and contributing to the reconstruction of their own practice. Yet whilst the ELS programme is clearly a prescriptive curriculum, or a ‘structured programme’, according to the DfES (2001c) it can be argued that the implementation will depend upon a number of factors associated with the individual schools and LEAs, and their policy and practice of early intervention for pupils with literacy difficulties. Individual methods of recording progress, such as Running Records (used in the Reading Recovery Programme) have also been incorporated into the ELS Programme. Thus the ELS appears to adopt and adapt features of Reading Recovery to meet concerns to cater for children with special educational needs in reading.

These adaptations, however, do not appear to alter the main thrust towards notions of efficiency in teaching methods, raising the ‘average’ level of text recognition and the development of external resources and control of expertise which derive from an emphasis upon ‘raising standards’ that underpins both the ELS and its parent, the NLS. Despite earlier attempts to incorporate aspects of Reading Recovery into the NLS, the ELS cannot be seen as a less expensive replacement for more teacher-and-student-centred, individualised programmes such as Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery is a highly structured prevention strategy aimed at identifying those who fail to achieve at the average level in the first years of schooling. It was developed in the 1970s as a teacher-based initiative, and its progressive heritage is evident in its whole language base and its teacher-centred problem-solving approach (see, for example, Wearmouth and Soler, 2002). As we have noted, Reading Recovery does not seek to raise general standards, at a whole population level. It focuses on a specific targeted audience of children and seeks to address their problems at an individual level through a specialist Reading Recovery teacher. The teacher who undertakes the role of a Reading Recovery tutor works with and consistently draws upon specialist knowledge to address her pupil’s difficulties. Reading Recovery stresses the need to focus upon the central role of the
teacher and the specialist tutor rather than teaching assistants and provides a programme of intensive professional learning for specialist Reading Recovery Tutors.

The ELS Programme is implemented by teaching assistants, who are trained by teachers according to the guidelines in the published programme. Reading Recovery takes place outside of the classroom and involves one-to-one tuition, whereas the ELS involves small group work which may take place within the classroom and the curriculum is structured on activities the children have mostly been exposed to within the Literacy Hour.

Conclusion

Teachers of children in the early years are under pressure to follow the NLS, a teaching strategy devised to raise standards of literacy for young children. This inevitably results in some children requiring extra support to achieve expected levels of reading. However, is it possible to consider a variety of ways to support individual children experiencing difficulties in literacy apart from structured programmes such as the ELS, which is underpinned by normative judgements and an associated emphasis upon cognitive skills? Is it possible to move away from an emphasis on improving skill development to a wider socio-cultural, inclusive perspective? This would imply the development of a richer, more complex understanding by practitioners about how to provide appropriate literacy learning for children experiencing difficulties.

While thinking about literacy learning in a more socially inclusive way rather than in a technicist mindset is still far from being an integral part of other national literacy policies, there are positive signs of a recognition of this approach in Australia (Luke, 2000). There is also evidence that here in the UK it is possible to move towards providing alternatives to supporting children as young as six years to learn to read with a more holistic, experiential approach to the early years curriculum. Concerns with the delivery of a literacy hour lesson for five- and six-year-old children have been recognised in Wales. In April 2003 the Welsh Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning proposed a foundation stage for three to seven to be phased in between 2004 and 2008. Key stage one tests have already been removed in Wales (Hofkins, 2003). These changes reflect pressures towards a child-centred approach designed to cater for everyone’s needs whilst encouraging inclusive educational pedagogies which show a richer understanding of literacy and individual differences.

Recent changes such as those in Wales have not been replicated in England; however, there has been an official acknowledgement since the implementation of the ELS of the need to continue to support individual instruction through programmes like Reading Recovery. The section currently giving information on ELS on the DfES ‘Standards’ website states that up to 5% of children may need ‘individual support’ after participating in three terms of the ELS (DfES, 2004, section 1). There is also an acknowledgement that ‘too many children leave this stage (Key Stage 1) with poor literacy skills’ (DfES, 2004, section 8). It is now argued that
a ‘small minority of children will continue to need support even after high quality teaching and ELS additional support in a group’ (DfES, 2004, section 8). It is also advocated that ‘Further (wave 3) support could include one-to-one programmes like Reading Recovery’ (DfES, 2004, section 8). These developments indicate official recognition that efficiency-driven policy mandates which set normative standards, and advocate group based pedagogies, need to be supplemented with individual instruction in order to recognise a wider range of individual needs.

We have argued that the drive to raise standards over the previous two decades has led to an emphasis on small group or whole class teaching in England. However, it is possible to rethink this approach in order to offer a variety of ways of supporting children who experience difficulties in literacy during their early years. It is possible to widen our approaches to teaching literacy to include individualised programmes which support individual children. Official recognition of programmes such as Reading Recovery indicates that it is appropriate to address individual difficulties on a one-to-one level to address individual difficulties, as well as providing small group and whole class-based teaching and learning environments. However, given the emphasis upon raising standards and adherence to Key Stage One testing in schools in England, it will remain to be seen if any moves to accommodate a more individualised approach will also enable moves toward socio-culturally based inclusive pedagogies which show a richer understanding of literacy and diversity.

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