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# BPRS Report 2003: Politics, policies and practice; perceptions of the National Literacy Strategy

## Abstract

The literacy debate has been a contentious issue in education for many years. Concerns about levels of literacy were expressed in the Newbolt Report of 1921, remained an issue for the Bullock Committee over fifty years later in 1972, and continue to dominate the education agenda today.

More recently the government have introduced the National Curriculum (DES, 1988) (NC) and the National Literacy Strategy, (DFEE, 1998) (NLS) in an attempt to raise standards and promote curriculum continuity across Key Stages 2 and 3. Despite efforts by schools to do this, the Prime Minister announced on 28th April 2003 that we have failed.

This work examines two perspectives on literacy, those of the teachers and the pupils. Through a closer examination of non-fiction writing as one aspect of literacy this has been a useful vehicle to engage with other subjects, namely the Humanities (Geography, History and Religious Studies).

It goes on to suggest that standards will only rise when the teaching of writing is truly cross-curricular and pupils are encouraged to transfer their skills. It concludes with the outline of a project that seeks to improve curriculum continuity across the Key Stage 2 to 3 transition and across traditionally discrete subject disciplines.

## Introduction

The school in this case study is all boys, mixed ability intake, state secondary school with a reputation for achieving high academic standards. It is located in a predominantly white middle class town in the Home Counties.

In the academic year 2001-2002 I was given the role of Head of New Intake with a view to becoming Head of Year 7, a pastoral and curricular role, when the pupils made the transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. As part of the transition process, I conducted visits to the feeder schools. This gave the pupils an opportunity to talk to me as their new Head of Year and provided me with an opportunity to meet my year group and obtain vital information from their Year 6 teachers. In the process of conducting these visits it became clear that the information I was collecting was pastoral (predominantly about the boys' behaviour and their emotional well-being) rather than curricular and learning (about the boys' abilities). With teaching and learning, thinking skills and pedagogy firmly on the educational agenda, there seemed to be a gap. In addition, in my curriculum role as Second in English, the only information I would receive on the new cohort would be Standard Assessment Tasks results (SATS) and Teacher Assessments (TAS). This struck me as being problematic for a number of reasons, including, most notably, the fact that although curriculum continuity was being promoted by the NLS in an attempt to raise standards, the only 'continuity' seemed to happening in the form of SATS results. Teacher expectations of the levels at which pupils would be leaving primary school were often felt by staff at my secondary school to be inflated and yet by the same token, the observation of primary colleagues was that expectations of secondary teachers seemed too low. In

talking to the boys, their concerns, whilst being primarily about dinner and detentions, also focused on the difficulty of the work they expected to confront at Key Stage 3.

Therefore, the initial focus of my research became the perceived gap between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 pupils' experiences. My first research project, conducted under the auspices of the Best Practice Research Scholarship scheme in 2002, followed the premise that one of many problems with transition between Key Stages 2 and 3 was two-fold: firstly, in terms of the expectation of the material being covered and secondly, through the pedagogies in which the material was being taught. Following a literature review, I refined my research to focus on Reading (En2), knowing that this was an area the primary schools I had been to saw as highly important and something the secondary school I was teaching in felt had been a casualty of the time needed to implement the NLS. This research yielded some interesting conclusions, most notably that the pupils were clear that what they thought they had learnt in English in Year 6 was stories, poetry and plays and what they thought they were going to learn in Year 7 was writing. I had anticipated that pupils' expectations would be different but I had not anticipated that their view of secondary school English would be so limited. As an English teacher, this preoccupation with writing also concerned me because of the supposedly equal attention we pay to the three strands of the NC, namely speaking and listening, reading and writing.

Fascinated by the marriage of writing and secondary school, I extended the literature search, which led to the generation of more questions about why writing was problematic. My perceptions were that this extended beyond the English classroom to

become a cross-curricular issue. As a result I decided to investigate writing across the curriculum in my own school.

I constructed and implemented a questionnaire to year 7 teaching staff to audit and assess the types of writing they expected to be covered by their year 7 subject curriculum. The results of these questionnaires highlighted that the teachers of the Humanities subjects and the English Department expected similar types of writing to be produced by their year 7 pupils. However, what was equally clear was that the pedagogies achieving this were quite different. I therefore began to think about the experience from the pupils' perspective and the ways in which writing emerged for them in different subjects. For research purposes I decided to focus my attention on the Humanities area of the curriculum and conducted interviews with teachers of the Humanities subjects and their pupils.

The results of the questionnaires began to allow me to refine my research questions further. I started with a set of overarching research questions, essentially those that I could refine as my research progressed. These were:

- What types of writing are pupils expected to produce?
- How are these types of writing taught across the curriculum?
- What do teachers think they are teaching about writing?
- What do pupils think they are learning about writing?

## Literature Review

## Literacy and writing

Literacy teaching can be 'broadly categorised into skills' focused (genre) or **'**practice focused' (process) approaches. (Hannon, 2000:37). The NLS assumes a skills focused/genre view: so 'literacy as opposed to literacies, literacy as measurable as opposed to not quantifiable and learning seen as transferable as opposed to learning as context dependent.' (Hannon, 2000:37). The NLS focuses on the acquisition of skills rather than on engagement in social practices, but Hannon suggests that it is hard to see 'how the former can succeed without the latter.'(Hannon, 2000:37) The idea of literacy as a social practice (in which literacy is constructed by use: functional literacy) is significant for this thesis (see Luke (2003) for example) because the current status of literacy, as defined by the government, has clear implications for society and its performance on an economic world stage; we must be increasingly sophisticated in our literacy in order to compete with similar nations. As such, part of the rationale of the NLS is to ensure that schools improve standards of literacy for pupils' lives 'beyond school' (DFEE, 2001a: 9). As a result of this, non-fiction writing (namely recount, information, instructions, explanation, persuasion and discursive) has been a particular focus. (Appendix 1).

The process writing and genre approach suggest two very different ways of approaching the teaching of writing in school. Based on the work of Graves (1983), process writing 'shifts the focus from the finished product to the processes pupils need to go through as writers'. (Maybin (1994) in Brindley (1994:186)). It aims to give pupils a greater sense of ownership and commitment to their writing. The genre

approach, based on the work of Halliday (1985), argues that ‘different contexts and language purposes are associated with different registers, or genres of language’ and that if teachers make the genres more explicit then pupils ‘will be able to understand more easily how knowledge is constructed in different academic disciplines.’ (Maybin, (1994) in Brindley (1994:186)).

The NLS model of writing is clearly a combination of genre practices used elsewhere: ‘Bruner’s concept of scaffolding (1985), the Australian Genre School (Cope and Kalantzis, 1993) and the EXEL teaching model (Wray and Lewis, 1997) can all be traced in the NLS.’ (Bailey in Fisher, Brooks and Lewis, 2002:25). Individually, the ideas of these researchers appear to make good sense. However, one might argue that their combination, in the form of the NLS, has lead to a pared down, step by step process approach (replicated in the clearly delineated stages of progression at word, sentence and text level) and a simplistic way of teaching writing in which grasping each of the stages in the writing process seems less important than the end product.

The fact that the technical skills of writing are important is not in dispute but as a classroom teacher the NLS appears to focus on these skills at the expense of creativity, which is clearly not a priority of the NLS or its associated assessments. Amongst the shared and guided writing promoted by the NLS and the dis aggregation of text to word and sentence level objectives for writing, the lesson time available for individual process written composition in English lessons appears to be lacking in both primary and secondary education. If this is the case, it is important to analyse what appears to be the conflicting aims for teaching writing within the NLS rhetoric, not only for English teachers but for teachers of other curriculum subjects too. If the

dimension of literacy constructed by writing, was indeed a literacy across the curriculum, ensuring continuity would not be an issue. For example, if all teachers taught newspaper writing in the same way they would be helping their pupils to transfer their skills. This would make the teaching of the NC more efficient and thereby make space for creativity.

The link between writing and assessment is a controversial one. The next section explores some of these controversies including claims of teaching to the tests and the setting of unrealistic targets.

## Defining literacy and writing through assessment

When the National Curriculum was first introduced in 1989 some welcomed the accompanying assessments for their 'systematic way of monitoring and supporting progression.' (Schagen and Kerr, 1999:1) These assessments were initially awarded on performance in examinations at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. Teacher assessments were introduced at a later stage. However, the new curriculum prompted some commentators to warn that this new style of assessment would change the nature of teaching: the promotion of a literacy curriculum would result in a curriculum 'devoted to the basics of testing because teachers would be teaching to the tests.' (Cox, 1991:2). These criticisms have also been levelled at the NLS and the SATS; originally developed to accompany the NC, it is interesting to note that they now reflect the content of the NLS.

In a society driven by results and performance an assessment driven curriculum seems to be unavoidable. If this is the case, the practice of teaching to the tests is likely to continue because it allows (or constrains?) teaching to reflect any changes in the examinations in order to improve results. For example, whilst secondary English teachers were aware that the Key Stage 3 examination was changing last year, details and exemplar material was not finalised or sent into school until the end of the winter term. This gave teachers only five months in which to reach their targets. For some teachers, the pressure to raise standards has resulted in teaching to the tests rather than stimulating a genuine rise in the standard of learning. It has also been pointed out that this notion of raising standards is contestable because in narrowing the curriculum, it is inevitable that standards in that *area*, will be raised but to the detriment of the broader curriculum. (Marshall, 1998).

## The setting of unrealistic targets

Hannon (2000:11) provides an interesting example of what the government considered a realistic target: 'In its preliminary report, the Literacy Task Force noted that by 2006 all children leaving primary school should be reaching a reading age of at least 11.' As Hannon points out, 'this part of the goal is 'logically questionable' because if there is a spread of reading ability the average cannot, by definition, be exceeded by all members of the age group.'

The DFEE Framework implies that with the introduction of challenging targets, the quality of learning experiences for many pupils will improve but if the quality of the learning experience is assessed by the SATS examination it is highly likely that the

results *will* have improved because teaching to the test often results in good pupil performance in that area. However, this is tinged with a note of caution: a teacher 'improving' their teaching to the tests does not guarantee a genuine improvement in the literacy of their pupils.

The idea of the challenging target is a controversial one. Pupils and staff set unrealistic targets may become de-motivated by their work in a relatively short space of time. In a climate of ultimate accountability on the part of the classroom teacher, de-motivation is a serious concern for everyone. The pressure on staff and pupils to ensure individual, class and whole school improvement, is immense. 'Good results' as defined by the government are highly prized because there is so much at stake for those concerned, including league table positions, Ofsted reports and Performance Related Pay. The Framework suggests that it is 'in all our interests to work together to provide clear and ambitious goals for all pupils in their reading and writing' (DFEE, 2001a:5). Teachers do not dispute this. The problem arises when achievement is measured by the attainment of 'challenging' goals set against a government agenda for pupils and, by association, teachers. The KS3 Framework (DFEE, 2001a:5-9) is littered with 'challenges' – for 'gifted and talented' (5), 'for pupils' (5) 'for Key Stage 3' (9) and forms 'part of an agenda of continuous improvement, driven by the state and linked to target setting, monitoring and self-evaluation' (Burgess, 2002:37). Whilst challenge could be seen as a necessary part of target setting, it seems likely that teachers are being de-motivated by the unrealistic nature of the government's targets and the number of targets they have to meet.

Examination results, as published in national newspapers, have traditionally allowed the government to present sensitive information on performance in an insensitive way. One could argue that assessment is controlling teaching and learning because the government need a measurement of improvement that can be 'sold' to the electorate. In the past league tables caused concern because they did not take into account value added, that is what the school had added to a pupil's abilities beyond that expected by predictions from examination performance and the expected level of improvement. The government simplified the reporting of examination results to league tables in an attempt to provide a system the general electorate believed they could understand. The same accusation can be levelled with regard to literacy. A rise in the percentage of pupils achieving a particular level of literacy and results that *suggest* an improvement of standards are relatively easy concepts to present and thus influence public opinion. As such, it is likely that these sorts of statistics will contribute to a government's capacity for re-election.

**A knee jerk reaction when a target is not met?**

After the first year of implementation, NLS test results (the SATS examinations introduced with the NC) raised many questions. According to the government's interpretation of the SATS results, while reading scores had improved, a high proportion of children, particularly boys, left primary school with poor writing ability. 'The underachievement of boys in English compared with girls is already well documented, and it is also clear that standards of writing among boys are often significantly below their standards in reading.' (DFEE, 2001a:18). Aside from questions about the reliability and validity of these tests, the government clearly felt that there was a serious issue to be addressed and introduced a number of initiatives to

deal specifically with manufactured anxieties about the structure of language. In an attempt to remedy the problem of boys' underachievement, one of their publications, Grammar for Writing (DFEE, 2000) focused on word and sentence level objectives. This document has been criticised for its lack of coherency and research evidence: the teaching of writing they present goes against 'British educationalists' (Kress, 1982; Meek, 1991), own contribution to understanding the sophisticated ways in which the idea of process has been adapted and propagated.' (Hilton, 2001:8).

More recently, the government have recognised the folly of setting unrealistic targets. Levels of attainment descriptors have been reduced from their original ten to eight. In light of regular government calls to raise standards (see Black, 1995 for a comprehensive account of the educational turmoil caused by trying to do this), reducing level descriptors could suggest that not enough pupils are meeting the targets. By lowering the number of descriptors, the government can lay claim to more pupils reaching the highest levels, and show that standards are rising.

In Literacy Across the Curriculum, the DFEE cite evidence from two sources, the Basic Skills Agency and the DFEE report A Fresh Start (1999), to suggest that 'for many years there has been a problem with literacy in the UK.' (DFEE, 2001b:1). Not only have they cited themselves, (a separate issue but poor research practice nonetheless) but they draw attention to the then most recent Key Stage 3 English test results, from the year 2000. From these results, the government set a number of targets for pupils in Key Stages 2 and 3 using NC tests as benchmarks. Interestingly, the Education Secretary reduced these targets at the beginning of the year because teachers needed to improve pupils' performances by 10% in twelve months if they

were to meet the government's five-year predictions. Previous failures in meeting targets suggested that this was highly unlikely to happen. By moving the goalposts one suspects that at some point the government will lay claim to having achieved their targets.

Such target setting has also reinforced the notion that it is English teachers who are accountable for the raising of standards of literacy despite government claims that it is the responsibility of all subject teachers. Cornforth (1998:3) suggests that 'the Government has isolated improved standards of literacy as essential drivers in the move towards higher standards in every area of the curriculum' whilst implementing the NLS through only one department. Meanwhile, the government insists that literacy is a cross-curricular concern.

## Results

## Key Stage 2 to 3 transition:

- **Lack of curriculum continuity in Humanities subjects across the Key Stage 2 to 3 transition.**

In Curriculum Continuity at 11-plus (HMI, 1989:10) HMI note that from 5-16 the curriculum 'is constructed and delivered as a continuous and coherent whole in which the primary phase prepares for the secondary phase and the latter builds on the former.' The evidence below shows that this is not the case for the Humanities subjects.

The evidence showed that none of the Humanities subject teachers knew what their Year 7 pupils achieved in their KS2 SATS despite there being copies issued to all departments and additional copies strategically placed around the staff room notice boards. In part, this was due to teachers 'not trusting' the assessments and feeling that they were not relevant to their subject anyway. Being assessed for writing a newspaper was not the same as being assessed for the history content of the newspaper and as such would warrant different marks anyway.

Another finding indicated that many of the Humanities subject teachers were not concerned that they were ignorant about what many of their year 7 pupils specifically covered in their subject in Year 6. Geography, History and Religious Studies departments believed that there was such a massive variation on what was taught in Year 6 and at Key Stage 3 that it did not matter whether they knew what the pupils were taught or not. Having already identified subject knowledge as more important to Humanities teachers than literacy, finding out what their Year 7 pupils achieved in writing in Year 6 seems highly unlikely. However, there was a sense that if the coverage between schools were similar then transition information would be useful. One of the history teachers felt that the Year 6 staff only taught the 'fun' bits of History. As a result, secondary school history was tedious by comparison and pupils often complained that it wasn't as fun as it had been at primary school. This also has implications for the perceived 'learning dip.' As such, there was a sense that some Year 7 teachers felt that they had to start teaching their subject from scratch by setting out their own secondary school stall. Others felt that this was part of playing the transition game. Either way, there was a 'lack of appreciation of what children had learned at a previous stage' (Dean, 1988 cited in Blatchford and Howard, 1993:2).

The expectation of starting with a *tabula rasa* was consistent amongst staff and curriculum continuity was not valued because in the past it had been of no use. However as Galton et al, (1999) point out, starting from scratch is not the same as a fresh start. This has implications for the teaching of Humanities subjects in terms of subject knowledge as well as the teaching of literacy.

There are a number of issues for further research here. The lack of communication between primary and secondary teachers across the Key Stage 2 to 3 transition means that the Humanities curriculum is not 'constructed and delivered as a continuous whole' as HMI suggest. (HMI, 1989:10).

In principle both the National Curriculum and the National Literacy Strategy should encourage more effective communication between primary and secondary schools and lessen problems of curriculum continuity. However, in addition to the problems of subject knowledge indicated above, Galton *et al*, (1999:20), pointed out that if the subject teacher only has contact with the class for one or two periods a week, 'there is little incentive for them to draw up teaching programmes that take account of the information passed on by feeder schools.'

## Literacy

- **Differences in definitions of literacy**

It is a contention of this work that the absence of an agreed definition of literacy in England and Wales has impacted significantly upon the implementation of the NLS. In this case study, teachers' and pupils' definitions of literacy were not the same. For

the pupils, primary school literacy became secondary school English and Humanities. For the teachers, the definitions were related to skills rather than to subjects. There are a number of issues here. The literacy of the NLS is a literacy that has been defined by the government. This is not a critical literacy (the analysis of texts) but a functional literacy (speaking and listening, reading and writing for example). As such is a literacy that is intended to allow British society to compete on a world economic stage (Luke, 2003), a literacy that has been reduced to a set of word, sentence and text level objectives and a literacy that can be taught by unqualified teacher assistants. There is no definition as such in the Key Stage 3 Framework but it is clear from the amount of documents and the whole-scale launch of the NLS that the government believe literacy is important and that it will raise standards; according to the DFES website they have produced no less than 335 documents and reports relating to the implementation of the NLS in the past academic year alone. It is no wonder that there is confusion amongst teachers and pupils alike. In the absence of an agreed definition, English teachers are clearly interpreting the Framework in their own way. As such, the pupils' experiences of literacy are different depending on their teachers' interpretations and indeed the subjects they are studying. Of course, you would expect this to be the case – all teachers are individuals. Yet, the government needs to ask if even English teachers, with an assumed specialist knowledge are constructing literacy in very different ways, what are the implications for teachers of other subjects?

**Pupil perspectives**

What pupils think they are learning about writing varies from one Humanities subject and Humanities subject teacher to another. The issue has become complicated by the

fact that pupils have come to understand Literacy and English as one and the same. They seem to think about literacy in terms of concrete activities rather than as a series of skills or a body of knowledge. For example, literacy was described in terms of 'reading big books' and writing comprehension rather than anything more abstract. Literacy meant having to do 'group work and reading aloud'. In this example, the pupils have clearly interpreted literacy as a functional rather than a critical literacy; in this case as reading. This might suggest that the activities they referred to were not activities they associated with any other 'subject'. Alternatively, it could mean that these activities were not explicit in other subjects but they did happen. For example, pupils claimed that they did not 'do literacy in History' but they recognised their use of writing frames and topic sentences in that subject. Pupils also claimed to do short answer questions in Geography and History but did not recognise it as comprehension. To complicate this, the literacy that the primary teachers are constructing for pupils is one that the pupils might come to expect which could explain the connection they have made from the primary school literacy hour to the secondary school English lesson.

**Literacy as English**

According to the Year 7 pupils in this study, primary school literacy clearly metamorphosed into secondary school English and was clearly recognisable by the tasks pupils perceived were carried out in English lessons. The pupils had tied literacy and English together because practices within lessons were the same. This appears to make logical sense: if teaching practices are the same, one could assume that literacy and English are the same. At face value this did not initially pose a problem for the pupils but a secondary school English teacher might see it quite differently.

**Teachers' perspectives**

English and literacy are not the same. (Marshall, 1998). This is emphasised when considering the various types of literacy, two of which have been referred to in this thesis, that is a critical literacy and a functional literacy. At the International Federation for the Teaching of English Conference (2003), the Literacy and Textual Diversity: English as Cultural Studies (Ltdecs) strand proposed the following pairings: literature and literacy; voices and bodies; texts and technologies. As a subject discipline, the label 'English' brings many other meanings. However, if we leave the labels to one side for the sake of argument and think about what English teachers actually teach, we might get further with the English/literacy divide. In an English that is made up of language, arts, new technologies, and culture (to name but a few) there is a place for literacy. I don't think that has ever been contested. The point is that if you remove literacy from English as a discipline, English still has much to offer. Perhaps there is an opportunity here for functional literacy to assume its place across the curriculum and leave a critical literacy to the English Department. One of the problems with the current framework is that its prescription is overwhelmingly aimed at the English department. As a result, teachers of other departments have not been as involved in the implementation of literacy in the same way as English teachers. Pupils appear to have interpreted this in their learning and see literacy as the English teacher's domain. Unfortunately, English teachers cannot do it all. (See Davies, 1996 for a comprehensive discussion of this idea).

Recognising that English and literacy are not the same is fundamental to effective teaching in this area. Once this is done the entire curriculum can take up its share of

the responsibility of teaching literacy. Whilst acknowledging the English department's expertise in the deconstruction of texts, to really improve the standard of writing other subjects must clearly teach (functional) literacy too. Some might even question whether there is room for a process as well as, rather than instead of, a genre approach to literacy as demonstrated by the NLS. In using the English department to implement the Key Stage 3 Framework and measuring pupil performance in Key Stage 3 exams the government are not measuring the literacy they think they are measuring. If literacy were really improving, surely there would be an increase in exam results at all levels in all areas of the curriculum?

**Whose responsibility?**

It appears to be the search for a definition rather than the lack of a definition that is the problem. The very notion of what it is to be literate evolves with the development of every new technology and every government. One way to look at the current definition of the Framework is to see it as a product of the current government and their way of thinking. Thus, with a new government, the definition of literacy may well change and all this debate will have to be engaged with once again.

Sefton-Green (2003) raised an interesting point at his recent lecture 'Informal Learning, Digital Culture and Everyday Creativity' with the notion that in fact 'everything is a literacy.' His questions 'When does something become a literacy? When does it stop becoming one? What is literacy?' support Hannon's assertion that 'Literacy is not the name for a finite technology, set of skills, or any other 'thing.'' (Hannon, 2000:32.) If the term, by its very nature, is beyond definition, this could mean that it is reduced to nothing. Alternatively is could become something that

everyone takes responsibility for because it is beyond being attached to one discipline. If literacy is multidisciplinary then literacy is about collapsing curriculum boundaries whilst still retaining individual subject specific departmental expertise. As such, any whole school literacy initiatives could look to the English Department for advice and yet treat English, as a subject, like any other.

Renaming English as literacy as the pupils in this study have done is very powerful. The government have also attached literacy to English in a similar way. For some, literacy appears to have become a guiding concept for English and English teaching, whilst for others literacy is a challenge to a literature based English. For Green (2003), literature has collapsed into literacy, a movement that he describes as 'a bright new dark.' This collapse could mean that when pupils learn to write, they expect it to be about the written word as a set of rules and no more; the 'dark.' (Note the Education Secretary's comment in the rationale of the Framework, DFEE, 2001a regarding literary pleasures). In this case, any brightness might have to come from the teachers as it is unlikely to come from the NLS.

**Writing as literacy?**

- **The impact of the NLS on Humanities subjects and Humanities subject teachers' use of different writing tasks to construct literacy**

Humanities subject teachers suggested that they explicitly taught writing. Pupils suggested that although they were taught how to write, the teaching consisted of content and structure, 'fit this information into five paragraphs,' rather than style, that is to say what to write rather than how to write it. One could argue that the pupils are

not being taught how to write. This is a concern when both pupils and teachers identified that in most lessons they are expected to complete a written activity.

The impact of the NLS could have been very significant for these staff but so far their experience of the NLS has comprised of too few INSET sessions and this case study. The explicit teaching of writing is something the teachers had not evaluated or in some cases even considered beyond the focus of their own subject specific requirements. Consequently, it is possible to question why some particular writing tasks are implemented in Humanities subjects from a literacy point of view. For example, the Geography department used different types of writing, such as newspapers and reports, to make the Geography work more interesting. In this context, writing was seen as a mood-enhancing drug rather than the literacy sedative described by other teachers. I suspect it also says more about Geography than the literacy strategy or the teaching of writing although the teachers admitted that their construction of literacy had been limited to word walls and subject specific vocabulary. In some respects this was nothing new – the words were always there. The impact of the NLS simply meant that the writing was now on the wall!

Within the History department there was a feeling that some staff worked independently because they knew what they did was effective. They stated that they had no intention of changing their practices. Other members of the department also worked in isolation but for different reasons, including their commitment to literacy, which was not shared by the rest of the department. Written tasks tended to focus on comprehension and essays which although taught were ‘never very good in Year 7.’

**The impact of the NLS**

Teachers in both History and R.S. alluded to their use of writing frames before the introduction of the NLS. There was a sense in R.S. that good practice was good practice and even if the NLS did not suggest writing frames they would still be used because they worked well. However, literacy as writing (for the R.S. Department) was not as important as speaking and listening; the level of literacy of a piece of written work was not as important as the ideas and concepts conveyed but the department used writing frames to support essay writing because it 'helped them get their thoughts straight before putting them on paper.' This approach to literacy was one in which the writing frame was valued as an organisational tool for thoughts (perhaps a thinking tool?) rather than a structural tool for the finished piece of work. The R.S. and History Departments referred to their use of the writing frame in different ways. In this example, the writing frame, although labelled literacy by the teachers, had different purposes. This is unlikely to help the pupils transfer their skills from one lesson to another. In terms of what the pupils and teachers think they are learning about writing, this example demonstrates that they are all at odds and as such literacy across the curriculum is likely to be ineffective. In addition, literacy as writing was clearly identified as a set of skills: although writing frames were used in Year 7, it was anticipated that they would not be needed in Year 8 or beyond because 'the pupils would know what to do by then.'

Pupils did not recognise the broader categories used for non-fiction writing. For example, whilst they could identify whether or not they had written a leaflet in any subject, they did not recognise it as a persuasive writing task. This could be for a number of reasons including, for example, the leaflet having a descriptive or

explanatory purpose. Alternatively it could say something about teachers' lack of a common language and the effect this might have on the pupils' abilities to transfer their skills. Pupils identified comprehension as an English activity but suggested they did not do comprehension elsewhere in the curriculum. However, it soon became apparent that in other subjects they did questions and answers. Although one and the same, the pupils clearly had not made the connection between the two activities. If teachers used the same common language, pupils, having realised they could draw on skills learnt elsewhere in the curriculum, might transfer their skills more readily and more importantly be aware that that is what is expected of them. This could have a positive effect on the teaching of writing because staff would be reinforcing lessons in other areas of the curriculum and pupils could practice and transfer their skills on a daily basis.

## Expectations and Assessment:

- **Humanities teachers' expectations.**

*'The pupil writing an essay in history could well be drawing on skills learnt in English, and practiced in other subjects such as RE. The challenge is to ensure the transfer of skills from one lesson to another by making literacy skills part of the explicit teaching agenda in all lessons.' (DFEE, 2001a:15).*

Humanities teachers expect pupils to produce types of writing that they do not *explicitly* teach. This suggests that the government's challenge will not be met because literacy skills are not part of the explicit teaching agenda in Humanities subjects. As a result, skills are not being transferred from one lesson to another. In

each of the three Humanities subjects, Geography, History and RS, pupils identified types of writing they were expected to produce in that subject that they were not explicitly taught by that subject teacher. Pupils also identified four other lessons in which those types of writing were taught. Coverage by the English department was the most comprehensive although seven other subjects were identified as ones in which the teachers taught writing.

Some Humanities subject teachers do not explicitly teach different styles of writing. There was a sense among the teachers of Humanities subjects that writing was being taught elsewhere and that pupils would transfer their skills or should at least be able to transfer their skills. This issue was compounded by the fact that staff intimated that whilst they had a vague idea of what good literacy practice should be, a number of constraints meant that good practice did not always happen.

Both Geography and History departments asked for help from the English department. They said that they valued literacy and felt that it was important, but they did not know how to teach it. One department in particular said that they would not know how to deconstruct a text in order to teach it. Others said that they did not deconstruct texts in order to teach writing because the type of writing and the work produced was not the important feature. In History there was a sense that no matter how the work had been written, if it met specific historical objectives then the work would attain a particular level; the teachers felt that the literacy level of the answer paper made no difference to the assessed level. Ironically, this led to the statement '…which is why pupils at 'A' level can't write essays.' Some teachers only taught how to write essays in year 12 because they felt it was not needed until then. This practice goes against

that demonstrated by the NLS in which pupils constantly revisit specific skills in order to improve them. If Geography teachers were able to teach essay writing skills further down the school they might find that pupils could write essays in Year 12. This may impact on teachers' expectations too. Current practice suggests that pupils are expected to know how to write such essays in Year 12, even though they had not been taught how to do so.

The RS Department assessed work using NC level equivalents devised by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). These mention literacy but it is not a focus area of the assessment criteria. Apparently, a similar situation existed in Geography. As long as answers had geographical content, literacy was not important. This contradicts an earlier statement from the same Geographer. This inconsistency reinforces the idea that literacy is valued as a functional tool until it is confronted by subject knowledge. At this point it's value decreases because the latter is seen as more important – 'the subject knowledge is what makes it [the written work] Geography.'

Humanities subject staff clearly acknowledged that best practice would demand that non-fiction essay writing was taught earlier in the curriculum. An essay writing structure could be used from year 7 to year 13. Across a school, the deconstruction of texts could be improved if all subjects in the curriculum reinforced similar models. Even if departments used the same terminology when dealing with different forms of text it would encourage pupils to transfer their skills. With further training and the resulting increase in expertise and confidence, the Humanities subject teachers could increasingly find ways in which both the specific demands of their subject and

literacy could be met in the time allocated to their disciplines by the curriculum. In fact Beavis (2003) and Sumara's (2003) work suggests that it is useful to look at other disciplines, fields and times when trying to understand one's own.

**Expectations**

- **Writing as the main medium of learning**

- **Staff and pupils had different expectations of the same type of writing task**

Different expectations of the same writing task lead to confusion between staff and pupils. For example, the Geography department used different types of writing task to create a sense of variety in the written outcomes pupils produced. In teaching newspaper writing they did not consider the five W's (Who? What? When? Where? Why?), the crossheads and the interviews expected by an English teacher. Thus in a Geography lesson, the expectations of having to produce a newspaper article would not be the same as those expected in an English one. There was a similar situation in R.S. whereby the teacher's definition of a description was 'an accurate account.' In contrast, an English teacher would be looking at the pupil's use of language, adjectives and adverbs for example, in creating that description. These different expectations of how to write non-fiction tasks are confusing pupils. If all Humanities subject teachers had the same high expectations and taught non-fiction writing in the same way, the pupils would be given opportunities to practice and improve their writing across the Humanities curriculum. As such pupils were missing opportunities to reinforce and practice their writing skills. Potentially, this could help pupils to learn these skills more quickly which would enable them to become more competent

and move onto ‘more difficult’ or different tasks. This could improve the quality of their written work and thus improve their assessments.

**Subject specific knowledge must come first**

Whilst acknowledging the importance of literacy, Humanities teachers were clear that the quality of writing must always come after knowledge about their subject. For example, a History and an English teacher observed one of the History teachers teaching a year 7 class. The English teacher was impressed by the lesson because it ‘highlighted the importance of literacy and explained the use of a writing frame’ whereas the History teacher criticised the lesson for having too much literacy and not enough History. Similar concerns were expressed by a school at the beginning of their involvement in the National Writing Project of 1995-98 who wrote about ‘the constraints under which we felt we operated in our different subject areas and the pressures of time caused by syllabus content and requirements. (Landy, in Brindley, (1994:181)). However, as Maybin (1994:186) points out ‘Learning about a particular subject discipline, involves also learning about specific ways of using language.’

**A political dimension**

The expected improvement in Literacy across the curriculum is being assessed by the government using written work because it is one way in which teachers can be held accountable – the proof in a pupils’ writing is apparently considered to be concrete. The pressure for increasing results is made more acute for teachers when one considers that the government’s apparent assumption is that all learning is linear and that a constant improvement in literacy can be measured by an increase in NC levels. Studies have proved that this is not the case and that a natural part of an effective

progression through our education system can include troughs as well as peaks, even for those who achieve the highest of results at the end of a key stage.

The pressure to deliver a continual improvement in the KS3 SATS has reduced opportunities for extended writing. There is a sense of incomplete continuity beyond Year 9 when extended writing becomes even more important because we then start teaching new skills rather than building on the ones pupils have already learnt which seems to turn the NLS on its head.

## To summarise

- What types of writing are pupils expected to produce?
- How are these types of writing taught across the curriculum?
- What do teachers think they are teaching about writing?
- What do pupils think they are learning about writing?

The following is not an attempt to resolve any of the issues this work has raised about literacy. It is a very brief summary that identifies a number of common issues within the Humanities subject departments. There are also some suggestions for further research.

**What do teachers think they are teaching about writing and what do pupils think they are learning?**

Humanities subject staff agreed that literacy was important. Although they could see the benefits of a cross-curricular approach to the teaching of literacy they said that they did not know how to put theory into practice. This applied especially to the

teaching of writing which pupils *were* expected to produce without having been taught explicitly by their Humanities subject teachers, despite their initial responses, which suggested otherwise. Humanities subject teachers also voiced a concern regarding their own subject material, which they felt had to take priority at all times. Although pupils were unsure what they were learning about writing they could identify some of the teaching strategies used by Humanities subject staff to help them construct certain types of non-fiction writing.

It would be interesting to track a Year 7 pupil across the Humanities curriculum to examine his writing diet and see if any writing skills (not just non-fiction writing skills) were being explicitly taught and to what extent. It would be fascinating to see how this developed year-on-year as he progressed through the school and see at what points writing was taught by the Humanities subject staff if at all. It might also be worth evaluating the progress of the Humanities subject departments in their attempts to introduce the teaching of writing. They may even set a precedent for other departments.

**Professional Development**

There was a clear call for professional development from all Humanities subject departments on two counts: firstly with regard to the teachers own knowledge of grammar and literacy, and secondly on how to teach writing (possibly to improve assessments). Humanities subject staff asked specifically for help from the English department. Aside from questions about the role of the English Department in the teaching of literacy, this suggests that the Humanities subject staff are at least willing to pursue an area identified as one requiring continuing professional development: at

least two out of every three members of each Humanities subject department said they wanted to know how they could improve the written work of their pupils. This sort of commitment would need the full support of the school.

**Curriculum Continuity**

Humanities subject staff felt that an important difference to acknowledge between primary and secondary teachers was that of the subject specialist and that inevitably Humanities subjects were taught with varying degrees of success at the primary level. That is to say that coverage of subject specific content was localised to particular primary schools. As such, whilst the notion of curriculum continuity made complete educational sense, it was difficult to practice because of the range of material covered in Year 6.

## The next step?

The idea that things get lost in the process of transition is not a new one. The notion of curriculum continuity has, in part, been addressed by recent government documents including the NLS, although there are issues here about how effective this has been. The school that took part in this research has recently started work on developing a curriculum continuity project. It seeks to address two transitions: from one subject to another and from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3.

Units of work, created by a Year 6 teacher and Year 7 subject teachers, can be accessed via the School internet; post Key Stage 2 SATS in the primary school or throughout the Summer holiday. Some of the work can be self-checked, while other pieces can be printed to hand into subject staff during the pupils' first week at

secondary school. One of the aims is to give pupils some idea of the written work they will be expected to produce at secondary school (thus easing some of their pastoral concerns) and thereby promote curriculum continuity.

This thesis is not the end of the research, but the first step of a very exciting journey into Green's 'bright, new dark.' (Green, 2003).

## Dissemination

The work on writing within the Humanities has already been disseminated to the departments of the school that took part in the study. It will also appear as a link on the school's website.

The curriculum continuity project is due to be trialled with a number of junior schools later this academic year. If successful we expect it to become a natural part of the transition between Key Stages 2 and 3 in our school and eventually within all the primary and secondary schools in our consortium.