The National Literacy Strategy:
The first four years 1998-2002

(This summary has been written taking the main findings and points for action and adding additional detail from the text of the report where this proved helpful.)

Main Findings.

- The National Literacy Strategy has had a significant impact on the standards attained in English and on the quality of teaching over the last four years. Nevertheless, it has not been sufficiently effective overall to enable the government to meet its target for literacy, namely that 80% of 11 year olds should attain at least level 4 in English in the 2002 national curriculum tests.

- Headteachers’ leadership and management of the NLS continue to improve, but are weak in one in ten schools. If this figure were extrapolated to schools nationally, this would represent nearly 2000 schools. The problems identified in the first year of implementation have not changed. The headteachers in these schools are unfamiliar with how the strategy is developing; they lack knowledge and skill in setting targets; and they delegate responsibility without providing enough support. Put simply, they do not do enough to make a difference to the quality of teaching in their schools.

Throughout the implementation of the NLS, reports have highlighted headteachers’ leadership as vital in determining the progress made by schools. The improvements reflect the headteachers’ increased knowledge and understanding of the NLS and their greater involvement in monitoring developments and making use of their findings. Literacy co-ordinators continue to be important in raising standards. In almost nine in ten schools, the work of the literacy co-ordinator is satisfactory and in more than half it is good. The co-ordinators are usually knowledgeable and effective; the best bring good humour, tact and persistence to their role. They encourage other staff to reflect on and analyse their own teaching through demonstration lessons they give; they lead in-service training and give advice. The most effective co-ordinators analyse data well and use the outcomes to track pupils’ progress. They are also able to interpret data and are aware of the implications for teaching.

The increasing importance of the role of co-ordinators is reflected in the national training which began towards the end of the summer term 2002 and is expected to involve all co-ordinators of literacy and numeracy.

- In successful schools, the NLS has been effective, not just in raising standards in literacy, but also improving the quality of teaching and learning in other subjects. There is more direct teaching, the lessons have a clearer structure and learning objectives are more precise. The strategy has increased the pace of teaching and raised teachers’ expectations.

During the first year of the strategy, only the most effective headteachers involved themselves sufficiently in analysing test data and setting targets. Over the last four years, this has become much more widespread and headteachers are aware of numerical data as a way of focusing on improvement.

Numerical targets are necessary, but they need to be backed up by specific curricular targets that will affect what happens in the classroom. Teachers need to know the pupils’ weaknesses and then teach accordingly. The use of curricular targets for ability groups are increasing. These targets influence the teachers’ marking of individual pupils’ written work. This showed not only what had been achieved, but also a pupil’s next steps.

- The progress made by some of the lowest-attaining schools over the last four years makes it very clear that significant improvements are possible. It is undoubtedly harder for some schools than for others to change teaching and raise standards, but
even in areas of social deprivation and staffing difficulties, just under half of the schools have made good progress.

- Pressure on the whole curriculum remains, but there are signs of improvement. Evidence from section 10 inspections shows that there are more schools this year, around four in ten, where the balance and breadth of the curriculum are good. Better timetabling of subjects and better links between literacy and other subjects are beginning to make a difference.

The recent OFSTED publication, ‘The curriculum in successful primary schools’ (2002) identified the key factors which contributed to the success of these schools.

- After a very uncertain start, there has been a marked shift in teachers’ understanding of, and attitudes towards, the place of phonics in teaching reading and spelling. The encouraging rise in the test results in spelling this year is almost certainly evidence of the difference that the teaching of phonics has made for both boys and girls at the end of Key Stage 1. In the reception year (Year R) and Key Stage 1, however, teachers still do not give enough emphasis to the application of phonic skills during shared reading.

- There has not been enough improvement in the teaching of phonics in Years 3 and 4. Teachers still do not understand sufficiently its importance for these two-year groups in improving reading and spelling.

A significant part of the problem in Years 3 and 4 is that much of the time in the part of the literacy hour which teachers are recommended to spend on phonics is spent on teaching other word-level objectives. These other objectives would be better taught more effectively within shared and guided reading and writing, such as common vocabulary for introducing and concluding dialogue, the use of a thesaurus and a dictionary, synonyms and antonyms.

- Weaknesses persist in the teaching of guided reading at both key stages in around one in ten lessons. These weaknesses are long-standing. There are also difficulties with the timetabling of guided reading.

The weaknesses in teaching guided reading are:

- the use of texts which are not pitched at the right reading level
- insufficient emphasis on teaching word- and sentence-level objectives, especially the application of phonic knowledge and skills
- pupils reading around the group with insufficient intervention by the teacher
- too much background noise

In successful guided reading, the teaching is focused clearly on key literacy objectives; these influence the purpose and pace of the teaching from the start.

There is more direct teaching of writing, particularly shared writing, but there is still work to be done on consolidating and using, in other subjects, aspects of writing introduced in the literacy hour.

The annual improvements in the teaching of guided writing have continued. The quality of guided writing is not yet good enough to provide an effective complement to the shared writing; the potential of shared writing is diminished as a result.

The quality of independent and group work has shown some modest improvement at the end of the fourth year. A number of factors have contributed to improving what has been one of the weaker parts of the literacy hour over the previous three years:

- more lessons give pupils opportunities to work on group and independent writing tasks which build on earlier shared text work
- the level of challenge of these tasks has increased
- teachers have become more skilful in organising the independent and group tasks
If reading and writing are to be taught successfully, the independent work is more effective when linked to the work on shared texts, which precedes it. Indeed, there might be occasions when guided writing could be omitted altogether, so that the whole class might move directly from shared writing with the teacher to independent writing.

The teaching of the plenary session has remained the weakest part of the literacy hour from the beginning. Effective plenary sessions occur where the teacher has made the learning objectives precise and has given the pupils tasks that relate to the main theme of the lesson. He or she is then able to focus on and evaluate a specific element of learning with the whole class. Sufficient time is given to review the work so that the teacher can tackle any misunderstandings. In addition, through detailed and targeted questioning or very brief tasks, the teacher gains a good idea of the progress made and is then able to plan or adapt subsequent work to reflect this.

- More often than not, the best performing schools show strength in assessment. In schools where standards have remained static or have fallen, day-to-day assessment is often poorly understood.

- The NLS framework has enabled schools to teach the national curriculum programmes of study for reading and writing directly and more effectively. It has contributed significantly to improving continuity. It has also prompted teachers to consider how and when to teach literacy in other areas of the curriculum. At present, however, few schools have a coherent planned approach to the teaching of literacy in other subjects.

Even where an example of good practice exist, such good teaching of literacy across the curriculum is by no means consistent in the whole school.

- There are some weaknesses, however in the NLS framework. In particular, the “searchlights” model of reading gives insufficient emphasis in the early stages to the teaching of phonics. Furthermore, the framework does not set out with sufficient clarity the phonic knowledge and skills that the pupils need to be taught from the reception year to Year 4.

- Teachers also recognise that they need to give more attention to speaking, listening and drama. Despite acknowledging this, however, they rarely plan in detail for these important aspects of the curriculum.

- The majority of teaching assistants provide valuable support. They are now invariably part of an effective teaching team, taking significant responsibility for groups and individuals as well as providing effective support during whole-class teaching. This is a marked improvement since the first year of the strategy.

- The NLS consultants in LEAs have been important catalysts in changing practice in schools and improving the quality of teaching. They have developed their own knowledge and skills and have used these expertly to support schools and individual teachers. They have been most effective where they have worked closely with schools to identify and follow up specific areas for development with training and advice.

Schools continue to praise their work and value their contribution highly. Training offered to schools was influential. Teachers found that the teaching approaches which were suggested worked for them in their own classrooms.

Most literacy co-ordinators reported that the support and encouragement from their Headteacher and colleagues made the greatest contribution to their effectiveness, adding weight to the finding that headteachers’ leadership has been vital. Co-ordinators held the view consistently that the NLS framework itself was influential.

- The quality of support provided by LEAs for the NLS has been uneven over the course of implementation and there has been little change in the past year. Although the majority of LEAs have put in place appropriate systems to monitor and support their schools’ implementation of the strategy, a small number of LEAs continue to cause concern.
Attainment in English at the end of Key Stage 2, as measured by the national curriculum test results, has not changed since 2000. The proportion of pupils reaching level 4 or above in English remains at 75%. Test results in writing show a rise of three percentage points since 2001, continuing the steady upward trend since 1999. There has been a decline in results for reading, however, which have now fallen for the second year running, albeit by only one and two percentage points respectively. Despite the continued improvements in writing, pupils’ attainment in this area is still too low and lags behind attainment in reading.

At Key Stage 1, attainment at level 2 or above in reading and writing, as measured by the national curriculum test results in 2002, has not changed since 2001. There were no improvements in reading, where attainment remains at 84%, or in writing (86%) for those pupils attaining level 2 or above. Spelling results improved by three percentage points to 78%. On the 2B benchmark, there has also been no change in reading this year, where results remained at 69%, but there has been an improvement of one percentage point in writing at this level for both boys and girls. These results show that nearly one third of pupils still transfer to Key Stage 2 with reading skills below level 2B: in writing, four in ten pupils transfer with attainment below this level, including almost half of all boys.

Girls continue to do better than boys in English at both key stages; they are now nine percentage points ahead of boys at the end of Key Stage 2, but this compares with a gap of 16 points at the end of 1998. At Key Stage 1, the gender gap is most marked in writing and spelling: at level 2 and above girls outperform boys by eight percentage points in writing and by 10 percentage points in spelling. At level 2B and above, the gap between the attainment of boys and girls in writing is 15 percentage points. This wide gap continues to be a cause for concern.

More schools are taking steps to improve boys’ reading and writing skills through:

- increasing the emphasis on demonstration by the teacher in shared writing
- supporting boys’ writing through the use of writing frames
- making use of visual strategies in whole class shared work to stimulate boys’ interest and motivation to write
- through good questioning, including directing questions explicitly to boys, ensuring that all pupils take a part in the lesson
- reviewing medium-term plans to ensure a better balance of writing genres, including those which might appeal particularly to boys, such as writing information texts
- purchasing additional texts, particularly those that appeal to boys
- making significant use of group and individual targets which motivate boys

**Points for action**

To build on improvements in teaching over the last four years and to make further progress on standards, those with national responsibility for the management of the strategy should:

- undertake a critical view of the NLS, paying particular attention to the clarity and usefulness of the framework as a tool for improving standards in literacy across the whole curriculum
- review and consolidate the guidance on the teaching of phonics, with a focus on the teaching of phonics and spelling in Years 3 and 4
- provide further guidance for all teachers on teaching guided reading, including how to combine direct teaching of a small group with worthwhile activities for the rest of the class
- provide guidance for schools on how to tackle the widening gap between the standard of boys’ and girls’ writing at both key stages

Those with responsibility for the strategy at LEA level should:

- continue to focus efforts on the one school in ten where the leadership and management of the strategy are weak and to see this as a matter for the whole-school improvement service
support NLS consultants in analysing schools’ specific needs and in providing training and guidance to meet them, particularly in schools where there is underachievement

To achieve the improvements that are needed, all schools should

- continue to monitor the attainment and teaching of boys at both key stages and ensure that all possible strategies are used to improve boys’ literacy
- ensure that the teaching of literacy is part of a coherent, planned English curriculum, covering the full national curriculum programme of study
- increase the amount and quality of phonics teaching in Years 3 and 4
- improve teachers’ knowledge of day-to-day assessment strategies so that subsequent teaching can be based on better diagnosis of pupils’ needs

Schools where attainment in English is below average in comparison with similar schools should:

- establish a clear plan of improvement which is discussed with and understood by all staff; use the analysis of data to form a clear picture of all pupils’ strengths and weaknesses, and match teaching and training to the areas where improvements are needed
- set curricular targets for groups of pupils and, where relevant, for individual pupils, monitor regularly their progress towards them and evaluate the extent to which they are achieved
- focus training carefully on the school’s needs, seeking outside support if necessary to identify areas of weakness
- monitor and evaluate closely the impact of training and build on the findings

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