

Student teachers and teaching reading

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Background

The teaching of reading in primary schools has been a continuing focus for debate over the past few years, leading to numerous official reports and research studies. One issue which has begun to come very much to the forefront has been that of the professional preparation of teachers in this area and there have been numerous suggestions that this is generally inadequate. This in itself is not a new claim. Surveys of the opinions of recently qualified teachers have for a number of years consistently suggested dissatisfaction among the products of teacher education with the training they received in the teaching of reading (e.g. Bassey, 1978; DES, 1988). There is much anecdotal evidence that primary teachers almost universally feel under-prepared to teach reading effectively as they leave their training courses.

More recently, both large scale (Brooks et al, 1992) and in depth (Lambley, 1992) surveys of the views of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) have confirmed these feelings of inadequacy in terms of teaching the "first R". This inadequacy is attributed by these NQTs to failings in their teacher education courses. Such research findings have coincided with the increased attention being given to initial teacher education in general, including government-sponsored moves towards a more school-based organisation and a competence-led model.

There are, however, some significant problems with research studies of the kind referred to above and a degree of caution is required in their interpretation. Firstly, the surveys so far reported have examined the opinions of teachers after their courses of training and therefore give only post hoc measures. Such retrospective self-report is inevitably highly unreliable as an accurate evaluation of experiences undergone since it fails to distinguish the extent to which subjects may have changed as a result of those experiences. NQTs' expressions of dissatisfaction with their courses may simply be a product of their new-found awareness of the complexity of teaching; an awareness brought about by those very courses.

A second problem is that there has been very little research into the provenance and development of teacher competence. Recommendations about (or enforced criteria for) the design and content of teacher education courses based upon simple outcome measures can only be part of the full story. Research suggests (Bennett & Carre, 1993) that competence is the product of a complex interaction between student knowledge, attitudes and beliefs as well as experience in college and school classrooms. In terms of the teaching of reading there is considerable evidence that teachers' classroom practices are strongly related to their attitudes towards and beliefs about the nature of the reading process and how children master this (see, for example, Deford, 1985) and also that student teachers' beliefs about reading change during their training courses due to a complex web of influences (Wray, 1988).

It seemed then that there was a very clear need for further research into the development of student teacher competence in the teaching of reading. Such research needed to focus upon the knowledge and beliefs about reading held by student teachers at various points in their training courses. From

such findings it might be possible to draw out a theory of competence development in this crucial area.

The Learning to Teach Reading research project

There is space here only for a very brief account of the Learning to Teach Reading research project. Readers wishing for more details of the project, and/or copies of the questionnaire and interview schedules are invited to contact either of the authors.

Aims

This project aimed to investigate the knowledge and beliefs about reading and teaching reading held by students on a one year post-graduate teacher education course.

The project addressed the following questions:

1. What did these student teachers know and believe about reading and the teaching of reading at the commencement of their course of teacher training?
 - (i) How did they characterise the reading process?
 - (ii) Which elements of the teaching of reading did they identify as important?
 - (iii) What strategies did they claim they would adopt in the teaching of reading?
 - (iv) How competent did they feel about the teaching of reading?
 - (v) What beliefs (as expressed in terms of theoretical orientation) did they hold about the teaching of reading?
2. In what way did this knowledge and these belief systems change during the process of a PGCE course?
3. To what factors did the students attribute changes in knowledge and beliefs?

Methods

The research sample consisted of the students enrolled on the primary PGCE courses at two institutions of teacher education in the South West of England. This made 176 students in all. A questionnaire was administered to the whole sample during the first week of the course, during the final week of the first term (i.e. before their first substantial teaching experience), and during the final week of the course (after their final teaching experience). This questionnaire aimed to gain a broad picture of the subjects' knowledge and beliefs about reading and its teaching. It was designed and piloted on the basis of a series of semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of 12 students and developed as a negotiated instrument consisting of items and sections drawn from our own understanding of the field (including a modified form of the Deford (1985) Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile) and categories and statements grounded in the responses of the pilot group. These administrations yielded a wide range of quantitative data.

A more in depth study was conducted of the sub-sample of 12 students (six from each institution) using semi-structured interviews. These interviews took place shortly before each administration of the questionnaire and were progressively focussed on issues as they emerged. The administration of these interviews was carried out by a researcher not involved in teaching these students. The

interviews provided a substantial amount of qualitative data with which to enrich and illustrate the quantitative data.

A brief outline of the outcomes

Very briefly the major outcomes of the study were as follows:

1) There were significant changes in student teachers' beliefs about the teaching of reading. At the beginning of their course they tended to hold a range of sometimes conflicting opinions about teaching reading. Some, for example, expressed with equal confidence the views that when children encountered unfamiliar words they should a) be encouraged to sound these out and b) be encouraged to guess. In terms of the categories used by Deford (1985) to characterise theoretical orientation to reading, they did not fall into either a phonics or a whole language orientation.

At the end of the course, however, students tended to have made up their minds about their beliefs. They had opted either for a whole language or a phonics orientation and were generally consistent in these beliefs. One of the effects of their courses, therefore, seems to have been to help student teachers clarify and make more coherent their beliefs about reading and its teaching. This we see as a very positive outcome.

It should also be noted that there was little evidence of a universal swing towards a whole language orientation and away from phonics. There were many students who apparently became convinced of the importance of phonics. This suggests that the caricature of teacher education which many members of the British government seem to hold (i.e. that it indoctrinates student teachers with leftist child-centred and whole language views) is not actually a reality. These students, at any rate, seem to have been quite capable of making up their own minds about where they stood on the teaching of reading.

2) In terms of their expressed feelings about their own competence in the teaching of reading, the students generally appeared to feel less competent at the end of the course than they had at the beginning in terms of the number of things they felt able or not able to do. This, naturally, was a staggering finding for us at first, although it fits with the research findings on student's feelings about their courses which we mentioned earlier. How could students feel less competent after a course in which they had received considerable input about the teaching of reading?

Closer examination of the student's responses to questionnaires and interviews, however, revealed that something extremely interesting had been taking place. When we examined the nature of the things which students felt competent to do at the beginning of their courses, it seemed that these were almost all to do with particular teaching activities. For example, many said they felt competent at activities such as hearing children read, using flashcards, using phonic worksheets, and so on. In the responses at the end of their courses, these kinds of statements hardly appeared at all. Instead there were many statements such as, "I am not sure about when I should hear particular children read", "I don't feel I know enough about the various ways of hearing children read." In other words, the students had moved from talking about activities to expressing concern about the decisions they felt they would have to make. The teaching of reading seemed to have become for these students a problematic activity, whereas at the beginning of their course they had seen it as a set of recipes for action.

We feel that this shift in the quality of the thinking of these young teachers has significant implications for theories of reading teacher development. It may also help to explain the rather negative view of the effects of reading teacher education which has come from research such as that referred to earlier. It may be that when newly qualified teachers claim dissatisfaction with their training courses, what they are actually doing is giving evidence of the extent of their development through these courses. At the beginning of their period of training, they do not have sufficient knowledge about the teaching of reading to enable them to 'know what they do not know'. The activities involved in teaching reading initially seem fairly easy to learn and they see the role of their training course as simply to train them to carry out these activities. However, as students progress through their courses they gain knowledge about the reading process and its teaching. This leads them to begin to problematise the activity of teaching reading and, as a result, to recognise their own limitations in it.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, this has been a necessarily brief account of a quite extensive research project. It has focussed upon what seem to us to be two very important findings which, firstly, shed light upon some previously puzzling research results and, secondly, suggest that the image of teacher education courses projected by the media and, apparently, believed by those in government, is too naive to be of much use in giving a sensible basis for future policy. From our findings it appears that student teachers are not indoctrinated during their training courses with wholistic approaches to teaching reading - rather they are enabled by these courses to make up their own minds about their beliefs about reading instruction.

It also appears that training courses might be having a great deal of success in exactly the area which they generally hold to be of greatest importance - that of producing teachers prepared to approach their craft as a set of linked problems to be solved. Seeing an activity as problematic is surely the first step towards being reflective about it, and it is reflective teachers who are most likely to learn and develop their practice as they gain experience.

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