

Teacher education and primary English: 23 years of progress?

David Wray^{*}

University of Warwick, UK

Teacher education in the United Kingdom, especially in England, has changed considerably over the past 20 years or so. The main purpose of this article is to analyse the direction and nature of these changes, using primary English work as a focus. The article uses snapshots of the provision in three institutions, each at a different time point, as the basis for the development of a number of themes describing the nature of the changes. It goes on to tackle the major question of whether or not such changes can be described as progress.

Introduction

Referring to changes in teacher education in England over the period of the 1990s, Furlong (2002) commented:

there has been little opportunity in England for senior academics to take a leading role in defining either the inputs or the outputs of teacher education. Therefore, far from being seen as an attempt to increase professionalism, these moves have been seen amongst teacher educators as attempts to de-professionalize teaching by challenging teacher autonomy. (p. 23)

Furlong here gives voice to what has become a constant, nagging concern for teacher educators in England: the increasing grip upon the content of the teacher education enterprise by central government. Atkinson (2000) has termed the dilemma this has created for teacher educators ‘a condition of “critical schizophrenia”, brought about by delivering government policies with one hand, while critiquing them with the other’.

Teacher education in the United Kingdom, and England in particular, has changed and for many teacher educators these changes have not been positive. Landmark events in the history of these changes have been the publication in 1992 of the government’s new requirements for teacher education (DfE, 1992), which set out a much enhanced role for school-based training and established the notion

^{*}Corresponding author. Institute of Education, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK.
Email: d.j.wray@warwick.ac.uk

of ‘competences’ in terms of the preparation of teachers, and the publication in 1998 of the DfEE document *Teaching—high status, high standards* (DfEE, 1998), which set out the then new requirements for courses aiming to produce qualified teachers. The rhetoric of change was thus set in terms of raising ‘standards’ of teaching.

One area prominent in the thinking which led up to these changes was that of primary English teaching, in particular the teaching of reading, a topic which had dominated the educational landscape, at least the mass media’s portrayal of it, since the middle of the 1980s. For all this salience, there have been few detailed attempts to document the changes that have taken place in teacher education in England, focusing upon the primary English area. To present a detailed account of these changes is the principal purpose of the present article.

The article is written very much from a personal point of view. I have been involved in teacher education in primary English since the beginning of the 1980s and my experience over the past 20 or so years, as I have moved from job to job, has been of almost constant change in the parameters within which the preparation of primary teachers has had to operate, and in what counted as acceptable content within this enterprise. My analysis focuses on three different teacher education institutions, and in each case I give a snapshot of the way in which, at a particular point in time, each institution went about its job of preparing teachers to teach English in primary schools. The analysis is based around two deceptively simple questions:

- Has teacher education in primary English changed over the past 23 years?
- Can we see this change as progress?

Three institutions

Institution A: a college of higher education in the North of England—1981

This college had been founded 50 years earlier specifically to train teachers, but it had, over the preceding decade, diversified to offer a range of other subjects to degree level. Its major course was the Bachelor in Education degree (B.Ed.), preparing students to teach in primary schools. Students did not study a main subject other than education and the major portion of their course was devoted to pedagogy, including how to teach language and literacy. Over the first three years of the four year course the students received three hours per week input in Language (it was not referred to as English). Language work was experienced as follows:

- In Year 1 of the course three of the available 33 weeks were taken up by a period of school placement. The Language element of the course was thus allocated 90 hours student contact time (30 weeks @ three hours per week).
- In Year 2 seven weeks were spent on school placement, which left 26 weeks, or 78 hours, for further work in Language.

- In Year 3 11 weeks were spent in school and 22 weeks (66 hours) in further Language study. Thus every student followed a compulsory course in Language of 234 hours.
- In Year 4, students pursued a range of options, one of which involved them in a further 66 hours study of Language. This option was conceived as a course of study in which, to quote the course handbook, ‘current issues and theories in primary language teaching and learning are studied, researched and debated’. As part of their work on this option, students carried out their own, small-scale research investigation in local primary schools.

There were no Masters level courses in primary Language available in the faculty.

Institution B: a university in the South of England—1988

This university had a strong reputation for work in education, both in teacher preparation and research. It ran a very successful teaching degree leading to the qualification of Bachelor of Arts (Education) (BA(Ed)), but an almost equal number of the teachers it produced were taught through postgraduate level courses. Students following the BA(Ed) were required to specialize in a subject to be studied at their own level, that is, with no necessary link to the teaching of this subject at primary school level. Study of this subject had to occupy the equivalent of two full years, i.e. half the four year course. Students wishing to specialize in primary English had to study English and drama, an entirely literature-based course.

In Curriculum English, which was how this part of the course was now termed, study was spread over a three year period and had to take up a minimum of 100 hours, some of which could be directed time, i.e. specified self-study. In fact the Curriculum English course was planned to include 80 hours of directly taught time with a further 30 hours of directed time. In this reduced teaching time, the emphasis changed to the need to equip students with practical ideas for teaching English to primary pupils in their classroom practice periods. In Year 4, the English/drama specialists carried out a very small-scale research project focused on teaching their subject, but given the nature of the English and drama course these students had experienced, these projects were all concerned with the use of literature in the classroom.

Masters level courses were seen as the growth point in the faculty and a thriving programme of courses in language and literacy was offered to local teachers. These courses were conceived as courses in which current issues and theories in primary language teaching and learning were studied, researched and debated (a paraphrase from the course booklet).

Institution C: a university in the Midlands of England—2004

This university ran a very large teacher preparation programme, although the primary routes were much smaller in intake numbers than the secondary. The four year degree course in primary teaching, the Bachelor of Arts with Qualified Teacher

Status (BA(QTS)), had been gradually reduced in intake over the previous decade from a high of almost 300 students per year, to its then current intake of 75 students. Postgraduate entry routes into primary teaching were now substantially larger in intake numbers, and indeed the university had recently decided to phase out the BA(QTS) programme entirely, transferring the student numbers into the PGCE route. Students (now referred to as trainees) still specialized in a subject although this now occupied only around 30% of their total course time. There were no longer any time requirements for the curriculum English element of the course (increasingly referred to as 'literacy' and in that guise the subject of regular external inspection by the government inspection body, OFSTED). Instead, there were now a mandatory set of national 'Standards' that the national government required all trainees to meet before awarding them Qualified Teacher Status. These Standards were expressed in terms of the competences and knowledge that trainee teachers should be able to demonstrate.

Trainees received 120 hours of direct teaching in Curriculum English over the four years of their course, with a further 60 hours of 'directed time', largely prescribed tasks they were required to complete during periods of school experience and which were carefully monitored by their English tutors. In practice, a good deal of the teaching time available for Curriculum English was devoted to assessing trainees against the Standards, particularly those based on subject knowledge.

Trainees who specialized in English received additional teaching in aspects of literature and linguistics. These specialist courses had the explicit aim of linking their content to primary school literacy teaching, but the extent to which they were able to do this was variable. One English specialist module, for example, was entitled 'Renaissance and Enlightenment Literature'. English specialists in their final year also followed an extra course which asked them to look at specific issues in school contexts. This was not conceived as involving small-scale research.

Masters level courses in education were now beginning to be seen as training courses also. The majority were funded, and inspected, under the auspices of the Teacher Training Agency, and a crucial indicator of their success was held to be their impact upon classroom practice.

This university, like many others in the country, was now heavily involved in a Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) programme, whose aims were to provide senior education professionals with the opportunity to study, research and debate current issues and theories in teaching and learning (a paraphrase from the course booklet).

Emerging themes

Taking the above three descriptions as snapshots of literacy teacher education provision over a 23 year period, there are a number of themes which seem to emerge when we consider the directions of change apparent here. Of course, this identification of themes is not scientifically rigorous. My descriptions are subjective, written from the point of view of an insider. Nor can I claim to have provided a representative sample of teacher preparation courses to study. My appeal in

analysing courses in this way is not to scientific objectivity, but precisely to the subjective communality which will permit, I believe, fellow teacher educators in England to recognize elements of their own experience in what I have described.

Theme 1: course type

All three courses described were four year degree courses, leading to a qualification that would entitle their holders to teach in primary schools. But, in terms of the place of such a course in the overall range of routes into teaching offered by awarding institutions, things had clearly changed over the 23 years. The four year, degree, route into teaching used to be the dominant course in the sector. Today, it has to fight for a place among many other alternative routes, and given that it is now one of the few routes which trainees have to pay to follow, and during which they receive no training salary, or grant, from central government, it is not surprising that many teacher educators do not see it surviving. Indeed, in the second of the three institutions described above, the four year route is no longer possible. In the third, a major debate had recently taken place about its survival and the decision reached to abandon it. The movement is strongly towards shorter, perhaps more intensive, periods of teacher preparation. This leads into the second emerging theme, that of the time devoted within teacher preparation to primary English teaching expertise.

Theme 2: time

It is only necessary to compare the time devoted to primary English in the course provided by Institution A with that in Institution C to see very clearly that less time is given now than was given 23 years ago. From 234 hours (300 for specialists) to 120 hours is a serious drop in time and thus the opportunity to learn. Set against this, though, should be the situation in Institution B, where only 80 hours of primary English work was provided. Given that these time changes were all the direct result of external, government, policy, what we appear to have seen is a major devaluation, and then some slight revaluation, of the role of pedagogic work in teacher preparation.

Of course, simple time comparisons do not tell the entire story. Effective use of time is more important, and it may be that in 120 hours trainee teachers' knowledge about and skills in teaching primary English can be developed in a more sharply focused and effective way.

Theme 3: terminology

Readers will have picked up on a change in ways of referring to the subject at the heart of the ongoing debate within teacher education. What was originally termed 'Language' became 'English', and more latterly 'Literacy'. But what's in a name?

Actually, in this case, there is a great deal in a name. Referring to a subject as 'Language' implies an inclusiveness about its content which later terms do not.

Under the heading ‘Language’ could come study of the role of language (any language) in learning, the importance of oral as well as written language, and the inter-relationships between all language modes—reading, writing, speaking and listening. (I am not claiming here that these issues were always well studied in the course being described, just that the label of the course did not act to exclude them from study.)

The 1988 Education Reform Act (DES, 1988) established the National Curriculum which became mandatory for schools in England, and specified English as one of the core subjects of this curriculum. At the stroke of a pen, introducing teacher education students to the enabling role of language in learning became slightly more difficult for colleges and universities, since they were then required to focus on the teaching of *English*. Children whose first language was not English were, almost automatically, cast into a deficit role. Teacher training students still studied and discussed the needs of these children but the tendency was to focus on strategies for improving their command and use of English, rather than on exploring ways of using their mother tongues as vehicles for learning.

In 1998 the label changed yet again as a result of the advent of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) and the concurrent introduction of a National Curriculum for Initial Teacher Training (DfEE, 1998). Although the NCITT, and the Professional Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (TTA, 2002) which replaced it, do refer to the teaching of English, they certainly foreground the use of the term ‘Literacy’. Paragraph S3.3.2 of the 2002 Standards, for example, requires that ‘those qualifying to teach pupils in Key Stage 1 and/or 2 teach the core subjects (English, including the National Literacy Strategy ...) competently and independently’. Just as ‘English’ represents a narrowing of the concept of ‘Language’, so ‘Literacy’ narrows the concept of ‘English’. The job of teacher education became one of preparing new teachers to teach the Literacy Strategy and discussion of the role of oral language in learning and of strategies to develop and extend spoken language became less salient. Such a concern about the lessening attention given to oral language was not confined to teacher education. The government’s curriculum advisers at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority were driven to respond to a national need in 2003 by their issuing of support materials for speaking and listening (DfES, 2003).

The effects of changes in nomenclature was, therefore, significant for the design of programmes of study for intending teachers.

Theme 4: the conceptual basis of teacher education programmes

When I first joined the staff of what was then called a ‘College of Higher Education’, my job title was ‘Lecturer in Teacher Education’. The enterprise in which staff at this college were engaged was universally referred to as ‘teacher education’. Today the enterprise is termed ‘teacher training’, although not by everyone. Colin Richards, a retired senior member of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Schools and currently Professor of Education, has this to say in a recent article addressed to students preparing to be teachers.

You will notice that I don't call them 'trainees' and I don't talk of 'teacher training'. Like you they are not being introduced to a simple straightforward activity where they can be trained to perform like machine operators on a production line or like circus animals. They are being inducted into a very complex professional activity. (Richards, 2006)

Richards' point neatly encapsulates the conceptual difference between use of the terms 'education' and 'training' when applied to teachers learning to teach. Calling such beginning teachers 'trainees' is now usual in most universities and certainly in official documentation. The TTA 2002 'Professional Standards for Qualified Teacher Status' (TTA, 2002) document referred to earlier begins thus:

The Standards apply to all trainee teachers, whatever route they take to Qualified Teacher Status. They allow providers autonomy in deciding how they will organise their training and respond to individual trainee teachers' needs.

Training, according to the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>), 'refers to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes as a result of the teaching of vocational or practical skills and knowledge and relates to specific useful skills'. One might react to such a definition positively, of course. Surely teachers ought to be learning 'specific useful skills'? It would be difficult to argue that teaching does not involve a range of skills, however complex these are. Mitchell (1999), for example, argued that there is a 'craft of teaching'. This is reinforced by documentation such as the National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching (DfEE, 1998) which listed a number of key teaching strategies to be used, for example, direction, demonstration, questioning, etc. There is little argument about the usefulness of these teaching strategies. The debate, rather, is about how such strategies should be introduced to, and developed in, beginning teachers.

Othanel Smith (1987) pointed out the huge distinction between different modes of teaching and characterized training as the promotion of rule-obeying behaviour among students. Educating, on the other hand, he defined as the preparation of students to make decisions based upon well-reasoned, ethical principles. Thus, 'training' should be only part of what is involved in producing new teachers. Such people have to be able to use effectively a range of teaching skills and strategies but they also need to be able to make decisions about when, why, how and whether they should use any of these strategies. Switching the name of the enterprise in which beginning teachers are engaged from 'teacher education' to 'teacher training' has profound implications for how this enterprise is defined and implemented.

This switch has even been enshrined in the names of the government bodies assigned the task of overseeing (accrediting) the universities and colleges involved in the enterprise in England. In Institution A described earlier there was no such government body, although the pronouncements of the Advisory Committee for the Supply and *Education* of Teachers were important in that they set limits on the numbers of intending teachers the institution could recruit. By 1988, Institution B had to seek official accreditation for its teaching courses from the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher *Education*. In 2004, Institution C was beholden to the

Teacher Training Agency, who categorized institutions in terms of their quality as providers of teacher training and allocated numbers of trainees accordingly.

Alongside the growth in the use of 'teacher training' to describe and limit the nature of what pre-service teachers engaged in, we have also seen the developing use of a revealing terminology to describe the intended outcomes of such an enterprise. Teacher qualities over this 23 year period have come to be described as 'competences'. This 'competent craftsperson discourse of teaching' (Moore, 2004) had its roots in the competency-based teacher programmes fashionable in the USA in the 1970s. Wragg (1993) described these as assuming that:

teaching could be broken down into hundreds and indeed thousands of particles, that trainees could learn each of these, and that they could be certificated on the basis of their proven ability to manifest whatever set of competencies had been described. (p. 9)

Although in 1991 an HMI survey of teaching competence in initial training courses in Britain (DES, 1992) rejected the narrowly conceived approaches to competency-based teacher education that it found, competence-based models began, from 1992, to exercise a strong influence on the design and accreditation of initial teacher programmes. More recently, 'competence' has been transmuted to 'standards', with the implied notion that teacher preparation was largely concerned with 'the achievement of prescribed, assessable and (presumably) acquired-for-life *standards*' (Moore, 2004, p. 4).

As with the shift from 'teacher education' to 'teacher training', the competence nomenclature has undoubtedly had an influence on the content of courses preparing teachers for the profession. Training beginning teachers to produce evidence that they have acquired particular competences has the effect of focusing the content of the courses these beginning teachers experience onto practical outcomes. What they can do becomes more significant than how they think, or how deep their knowledge might be about issues connected with schools and classrooms. The relationship between theory and practice becomes much different in such courses.

Theme 5: the nature of student experience

A common experience for students in Institution A in 1981 was to attend lectures and seminars where they were presented with a range of theoretical insights, often contradictory, and, after being given chance to discuss these, were then asked to consider the practical implications for themselves as teachers. Thus a seminar focused on the teaching of reading began by presenting issues in the then current debate about phonics or look-and-say as an approach to the initial teaching of reading. At the end of this seminar, students were asked to prepare their own responses to the debate and outline an 'ideal' beginning reading programme they would wish to follow when teaching. Apart from a few students who relished the space to debate provided by such an approach, most students experiencing this session, and lots like it, hated it and complained, often bitterly, than nobody ever told them how to teach beginning reading. Surveys of the opinions of recently qualified teachers consistently suggested dissatisfaction among the products of

teacher education with the training they received in the teaching of reading (e.g. DES, 1988). As late as 1992, both large-scale and in depth surveys of the views of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) confirmed these feelings of inadequacy in terms of teaching the 'first R'. This inadequacy was attributed by these NQTs to failings in their teacher education courses.

Contemporary teacher preparation courses take almost the opposite approach. Because so much of the content of these courses is prescribed by government requirement, and is couched in terms of what emergent teachers should be able to *do*, the theory behind particular teaching approaches and actions tends to be taken largely for granted. After all, courses have only a limited time (time which is generally getting shorter—see Theme 1 above) to ensure that all trainees achieve competence in literally dozens of 'Standards'. Considering theoretical issues can seem like a luxury they cannot afford.

Interestingly, however, alongside the official move towards practice-oriented teacher preparation, the past 20 or so years have also witnessed the growth of a theoretical movement towards the 'reflective teacher'. Writers such as Schön (1987) and Pollard and Tann (1993) had an enormous influence upon *thinking* about teacher preparation, but this influence was increasingly at odds with developments on the ground as institutions came to terms with the demands of the TTA requirements. The essence of being a reflective teacher was to evaluate, and theorize about, one's own teaching, yet self-evaluation is only tangentially referred to in the current Professional Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (TTA, 2002), where Standard 1.7 requires that qualified teachers should be 'able to improve their own teaching, by evaluating it, learning from the effective practice of others and from evidence'. There is no implication here, or anywhere in the current Standards, that what counts as improving one's own teaching is at all theoretically contestable. As can be seen from the earlier descriptions of the courses in the three institutions, the point at which 'current issues and theories in primary language teaching and learning are studied, researched and debated' has shifted over these 23 years, and now is seen as definitely a postgraduate activity.

Theme 6: the assessment of student development

Linked with the movement towards competency-based models of initial teacher preparation has been a change in the means of assessing beginning teachers' fitness to receive the university awards which signal their qualification as teachers. In each of the cases being examined here, the end product was a degree, and thus it might be expected that the assessment of students as they worked towards this qualification would be similar to the assessment patterns used in degree programmes in other, cognate, disciplines such as sociology, psychology, etc. In Institution A, this was certainly the case. Assessment was carried out largely through traditional essays in which issues were debated. A typical example was the following assignment title: 'The Bullock report (1975) claimed that "there is no one method, medium, device or philosophy that holds the key to the process of learning to read". Examine the

major influences on children's success in becoming readers and evaluate the relative importance of each of these'. This can be contrasted with an assignment title set to the students in Institution C—'Design a shared reading resource for use with a particular age group. Explain and justify the elements of your design. Try your resource out with a group of pupils and evaluate its success'.

The main difference between these two assignment titles is that the first asks for a theoretical debate and ostensibly requires no reference to the students' own classroom experiences. The second focuses upon practical skills and classroom outcomes but only tangentially requires any great depth of theoretical understanding on the part of the students. As was the case with Theme 5 above, there is little doubt about which of these approaches to assessment was preferred by the students concerned. The remoteness of the institution's assessment practices, and of the course generally, from the practical realities of classroom life was a constant source of complaint from students in Institution A.

Theme 7: approaches to research evidence

The retreat from theory implied by the discussion of the previous two themes has also been manifested in the changing ways in which research has been treated in teacher preparation courses. There have been changes in two dimensions.

First, there has been a significant change in the level at which research findings are used and students encouraged to read original research reports. 'Hot' research findings at the time of the snapshot given above of work in Institution A were Southgate *et al.* (1981) and Lunzer and Gardner (1979) and contemporary students were expected to read and discuss the original accounts of these research studies. By 2004, students in Institution C were largely referred to summary statements of research findings, our own *Primary English: teaching theory and practice* (Medwell *et al.*, 2001) being a particular example almost ubiquitously found on course reading lists. Current 'hot' research reports (e.g. Johnston & Watson, 2005) only become required reading at Masters level and beyond.

Second, there have been changes in what counts as research for intending teachers. Circular 4/98 from the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE, 1998), which first set out the 'Standards for the Award of Qualified Teacher Status', specified that primary teachers eligible to gain QTS 'are aware of, and know how to access, recent inspection evidence and classroom relevant research evidence on teaching primary pupils in the subject, and know how to use this to inform and improve their teaching' (Annexe A, Section A.2dv). The 2002 revision of these Standards does not even mention the term research, and the requirement quoted above has been transmuted to: 'They are able to improve their own teaching, by evaluating it, learning from the effective practice of others and from evidence' (TTA, 2002, S1.7).

What we have here is, in the first instance, a conflation of 'inspection evidence' and 'research evidence' (although not all research evidence but only that which someone can identify as 'classroom relevant'). These are given equal status, even though they are obtained by very different methodological means. The process and

reliability of 'inspection evidence', that is, that carried out and published by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), has come under a great deal of scrutiny, with Campbell and Husbands (2000) and Jones and Sinkinson (2000) being only two examples of many critical reports, and it should be noted that, unlike most published research findings, Ofsted evidence is not subject to a critical peer review process before it becomes public.

Changing official requirements for teacher preparation courses also significantly downgrades the place of research findings in the process. It is hard to resist the impression that the initial preparation of teachers has moved towards being an activity which is research and theory free, with an emphasis instead upon the disseminating of 'effective practice' (even though there is little attempt to define what 'effective' means). The idea of beginning teachers being asked to critique the effective practice and the evidence they are meant to draw upon is out of kilter with the tenor of the preparation process.

Have we made progress?

The big question arising from this analysis of changes in programmes of teacher preparation in the teaching of English language at primary school level is, of course, 'Does it produce better teachers of primary English?' Are the teachers emerging from current teacher preparation programmes better equipped to teach English effectively to primary pupils? Any answer to such a question will inevitably be subjective. We lack sufficient objective evidence with which to make judgements, although there are one or two pointers we can use.

First, we have to take note of the dissatisfaction which commonly used to be expressed by beginning teachers of the preparation they had experienced at college/university for the teaching of reading. As noted above, a number of studies documented this dissatisfaction, which was largely attributed by the students to their course being too theoretical in orientation. An alternative take on this phenomenon did, however, emerge from research the authors of this paper carried out in 1994 (Wray & Medwell, 1994). This study tracked beginning teachers through their year-long initial preparation course and found that these students actually felt more competent in, and confident about, the teaching of reading at the beginning of their course than they did at the end. We had the following to say about our principal finding:

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. (p. 44)

Such a finding suggests that one of the results of initial teacher preparation being seen as a time to discuss theory, rather than simply training students in particular practices, was that these students problematized the teaching activities in which they were engaged. One might hypothesize that teachers who had done that would be less likely to follow slavishly external directions about how to teach, and more likely to adapt practical advice to the perceived needs of the pupils they were teaching.

Another piece of evidence comes from the 'Effective Teachers of Literacy' project (Wray *et al.*, 2002), in which the knowledge, beliefs and practices of a group of primary teachers identified as being effective literacy teachers were studied. A key finding here was that such teachers had developed personal philosophies of teaching literacy, and tended to have been engaged at some point in their careers in research projects in the area of literacy and language development and teaching. They were certainly not teachers who were slavishly and uncritically following a set scheme for teaching. This suggests a strong role for debate about the theory of teaching literacy in the preparation of effective teachers.

Of course, set against such evidence has to be placed the undoubted fact that the past 20 years have seen substantial increases in our general understanding about a number of salient issues.

First, we know a great deal more about literacy and literacy learning. Our understandings, for example, about the beginnings of reading are such that it is now impossible for us to engage in such simplistic debates as to which is best, phonics or look-and-say. A review of the evidence surrounding the so-called 'Great Debate' in teaching reading (Wray, 1997) concluded that there were a number of key propositions about the teaching of reading that would command general acceptance among researchers and teachers, namely:

- that reading was a complex process which could not be reduced to simplistic approaches such as phonics or 'real books';
- that teaching methods needed to build upon what children did well, that is, look for meaning first and foremost in the experiences put in front of them; and
- that children needed to be taught the technicalities of reading but within a context of meaningful textual experiences.

Our understandings about literacy in the world outside school have also been immeasurably enhanced by study and debate about the so-called 'new literacies' (Street, 2003) whether by this we mean the diversity of social literacies used by various communities, or the multi-modal literacies emerging through interactions with non-print texts (Jewitt & Kress, 2003).

Second, we have vastly increased our knowledge of the nature of effective teaching and the qualities of effective teachers. Research in this area has generally moved from a search for the generic qualities of effective teachers (e.g. Muijs & Reynolds, 2001) to attempts to unpick the factors which might influence teachers' effectiveness in a range of contexts (Muijs *et al.*, 2004) and we now have access to a very sophisticated model of teacher effectiveness, which should help inform approaches to teacher preparation.

Yet such increased understandings have not always fitted well with the increasingly tight restrictions within which teacher preparation courses have had to operate, particularly since the publication of Circular 4/98 (DfEE, 1998). The result of this has been, I would argue, that the key difference between teacher preparation in the early 1980s and the process now is that, as providers of training courses, we know a great deal more now than we did in the 1980s, but we also have a great deal less freedom to use that knowledge. The teachers we produce may be more accomplished practically than those produced during the 1980s (and the jury is actually still out on this one) but they are also much less well prepared to formulate their own theories of teaching and learning, and consequently less able to resist direction from central government.

To answer the questions with which I began this article:

- Has teacher education in primary English changed over the past 23 years? Yes, considerably.
- Can we see this change as progress? There have been gains and losses, but if we have lost an emerging teaching work force with the capacity and habit of constantly questioning what they do in classrooms, then we are all, schools, pupils and teacher educators, the poorer for it.

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