Understanding Primary Education

Developing professional attributes, knowledge and skills

**Edited by
Penelope Harnett**

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Understanding Primary Education will help trainees and newly qualified teachers reflect on the professional decisions that they make within their planning and classroom practice. Key issues and policies within contemporary education are analysed through reference to research and case studies of pedagogical practice to provide a broad perspective of the curriculum with a focus on what curriculum breadth and balance looks like in practice. The book encourages readers to think beyond the statutory curriculum and consider questions such as:

- What views of education are held in the twenty-first century?
- What possible alternatives might readers envisage?
- In what ways are children encouraged to be active participants in their own learning within different educational settings and communities?

Drawing on the voices of trainees, teachers, other education professionals and, most importantly, those of children, the authors illuminate how learning is facilitated and how knowledge and understandings are constructed collaboratively within the classroom and other settings. Each chapter begins with the identification of several key questions linked to such themes as curriculum planning, pedagogy, inclusion, assessment and children's learning, which readers are encouraged to relate to their own experiences.

With case study material drawing on a range of educational settings, activities and reflections that invite readers to consider the issues discussed, this book will prove an invaluable resource for all trainees and newly qualified teachers.

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Preface

Penelope Harnett

In this book we aim to support primary trainees and newly qualified teachers in reflecting on their own values and the impact which these values may have on the teaching and learning occurring in their own classrooms. We emphasise the importance of listening to learners in determining worthwhile learning experiences and in thinking holistically about learners' all round development.

During the last two decades there have been tremendous changes within the primary and Early Years curricula. The introduction of the National Curriculum moved most of the curriculum decision making away from teachers and children in schools. Instead, curriculum decisions were made in accordance with central prescription detailing specific content to be learned which could then be assessed and measured. Assessment was based on linear progression within ten levels of achievement; children's progress was seen as a steady, upward progression through these different levels. OfSTED provided a framework in which the effectiveness of curriculum implementation and assessment could be monitored.

This approach towards the curriculum, planning, implementation and assessment was consolidated throughout the 1990s and was central to the New Labour agenda in 1997 with its focus on targets and target setting. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies further extended central control, not only of the content of the curriculum, but also of the ways in which it was to be delivered. The Strategies removed teachers one step further away from curriculum planning and there was less opportunity for individual or creative responses to children's different learning needs and interests.

More recently, however, there is evidence that central control of the curriculum is beginning to relax. The Values and Purposes of Education described in Curriculum 2000 (DfEE and QCA 1999) signal opportunities for schools to begin to decide on ways in which they might best meet the needs and interests of children and their communities. Schools' responsibilities in tailoring the curriculum to meet the needs of children within their communities are further strengthened in the Primary National Strategy, which urges the need for creative interpretations of the curriculum (DfES 2003a). The

Guidance for the Foundation Stage (DfEE and QCA 2000) also supports teachers in their individual responses to children's learning across a range of different experiences.

However, it may take time to establish this renewed emphasis on teachers' participation in determining learning experiences within their classrooms and educational settings. We note that teachers' professional autonomy has been eroded in recent years.

A parallel trend has also appeared in teacher training. The concentration on the successful fulfilment of a narrow range of standards has often been at the expense of learning about more creative approaches to curriculum planning and children's learning. Newly qualified teachers and trainee teachers are trained to deliver the curriculum, yet if this curriculum has to have any relevance for the children whom they teach, they also need opportunities to question the values which underpin the curriculum. In this respect, we argue that both teachers and trainees require support to articulate their beliefs and values and to consider how they might be developed through the experiences which they plan for children. Policy initiatives such as the *Every Child Matters* agenda and the new workforce agreements require teachers to clarify their contributions to children's education and the different roles which they play within their communities.

Understanding Primary Education: Developing professional attributes, knowledge and skills is designed to help trainees and newly qualified teachers respond to the challenge of more active participation and support them in reflecting on the professional decisions which they make within their planning and work with children. We discuss the challenges of policymaking within different chapters and suggest alternative possibilities. A broad perspective of children's learning is outlined and we encourage readers to reflect on the practical implications of taking such a point of view. We explore such questions as: What experiences are important for children's learning and development? How may they be planned, organised and implemented within school and Early Years settings? What responsibilities do teachers and children have in developing these learning experiences? How might children's learning be enhanced through extending relationships with different communities?

Implicit within our discussion are questions such as: What views of education are held in the twenty-first century? What possible alternatives might readers envisage? In what ways are children encouraged to be active participants in their own learning within different educational settings and communities?

Using children as the starting point, we discuss how their learning may be developed beyond the statutory requirements to consider their education in its fullest sense. Teachers' roles as facilitators and collaborators within children's learning are identified. We draw on the voices of different participants within a range of educational encounters and include a number of case

studies to reflect creative interpretations of the curriculum and children acting as agents in their own learning.

How this book is structured

In Chapter 1, *The social distribution of school knowledge in primary classrooms,* Richard Eke and Lalit Kumar discuss the social construction of knowledge by learners and ways in which teachers control the learning agenda through the way in which they talk to children. Teachers' interactions with their pupils are analysed and conclusions drawn on the extent to which classroom talk enables children to initiate and articulate their ideas. The centrality of talk for learning is emphasised and is a theme which is returned to throughout many of the subsequent chapters in the book.

The background policy context for the development of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and more recently the Primary National Strategy is analysed in Chapter 2, *Support or straitjacket? A tale of three Strategies*. Jo Barkham and Jo Miller examine the outcomes of the Strategies and question whether they have really raised standards and at what price.

Helen Butcher and John Lee track policies which extend the notion of education for the Early Years in Chapter 3, *Social care, childcare and education: Exploring issues in the Early Years*. They argue that Early Years professionals need to be cognisant of the social as well as the educational policy frameworks in which their work is located. The impact of a broad range of policy on practice is a recurrent theme throughout the book and is discussed in several chapters.

Martin Ashley and Michael Nicholson invite the reader to consider *What makes a pedagogy fit for Key Stage 2?* in Chapter 4. They draw on two comparative studies to question whether Key Stage 2 children are developmentally any different from Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 3 children and ask whether this matters. Secondly, they question whether one teacher can ever know enough to teach the whole of the Key Stage 2 curriculum.

The impact of assessment on children's learning is discussed by Gordon Guest and John Lee in Chapter 5, *Current assessment practice: Driving or supporting practice?* They analyse the contribution which assessment for learning may make to children's development and recognise the potential tensions arising from this view of assessment with current governmental concerns for higher standards, target setting and league tables.

In Chapter 6, *Developing inclusive school communities,* Helen Mulholland and Jane Tarr consider the concept of an inclusive community. Different interpretations of inclusivity are explored through the voices of different community members (children, teachers, parents, community professionals) who represent views of communities in their broadest sense.

Sue Hughes, Mandy Lee and Juliet Edmonds investigate what happens when teachers weaken their grip on the prescriptive curriculum and children

are given space for developing their own learning. Chapter 7, *Space for learning?* explores children's views and draws attention to the potential of ICT for developing creative learning opportunities.

Penelope Harnett and Maria Vinney ask *What has happened to curriculum breadth and balance in primary schools?* in Chapter 8. They trace the development of the primary curriculum since the Education Reform Act and explore the effect of government policy on curriculum breadth and balance. Teachers' views on the curriculum are analysed and the chapter concludes with discussion of children's views on their learning in different contexts.

Alison Bailey and Steve Barnes continue the theme of children's active engagement and control of their learning in Chapter 9, *Children's futures, our futures: Educating citizens for the twenty-first century*. They remind readers of education's role in preparing citizens of the future and explore ways in which this might be developed through different case study material.

Chapter 10 identifies the challenges currently facing teachers in terms of their professional identity. John Lee and Christine Macfarlane in *Facing the future: The primary teacher in the twenty-first century*, trace the development of the teaching profession and analyse the extent to which recent policy has questioned teachers' professionalism and their roles as educators.

Successful education is dependent on teachers who can critically analyse different aspects of learning and teaching and who have an informed vision of their role. The book aims to develop the ability of trainees and newly qualified teachers to analyse key issues through focusing on identified questions which are explored within different chapters. Reflections and Activities are designed to encourage the reader to develop their understanding of issues more fully and to identify potential implications for their own work with children.

Chapter 1

The social distribution of school knowledge in primary classrooms

Richard Eke and Lalit Kumar

Introduction

This chapter addresses some of the main themes of the book. We discuss the social construction of knowledge by learners in the context of the teachers' control of the learning agenda, through the way they talk about subject content when they assist pupil performances. The way teachers talk has direct consequences for the way in which pupils talk, and consequently for the sense they are able to make of their different lessons.

   The chapter will help you to think about the following questions:

- How do teachers control learning in their classrooms through their interactions with pupils?
- How do pupils make sense of teachers' talk?
- What forms of classroom organisation support pupil talk and the articulation of pupils' ideas?

   We draw on evidence from teacher–pupil interactions and ask questions about the opportunities pupils have to articulate their understanding. The extent to which arrangements for classroom talk allow pupils to initiate or share in the development of ideas is discussed. The chapter also flags the importance of whole-class interaction and the way in which this varies between pupils. The impact of gender, special educational needs and age is visited in an attempt to question the idea of a single audience for whole-class teaching. In conclusion, some broader issues related to such teaching are raised. What you will find here is discussion of the way knowledge and talk interact with each other, the way different pupils talk in classrooms, and the way talk supports learning in different curriculum subject areas. You will find plenty of extracts from the classrooms we have studied, which reflect the talk of skilled and experienced teachers.

Classroom talk and primary pedagogy

In recent years, Robin Alexander (2004) has raised questions about what it means to be a primary teacher and what pedagogy for the primary years might look like. In his exploration of primary teaching in an international context (Alexander 2000), he uses the term 'pedagogy' to mean 'the science of the art of teaching'. As Alexander's own work shows, and others so clearly demonstrate, the science is based in the theorised study of classrooms. Primary school teachers have always known, as Stenhouse (1984) reminds us, that the legitimacy of studying classrooms rests on the intention to improve the quality of learning for those in them. Clarity about what counts as improving the quality of learning requires clarity about links between learning and teaching. A key way of understanding this process is to look at what goes on inside primary classrooms – we shall refer to some studies that do this shortly – and perhaps most tellingly, look at how people talk to each other in classrooms. Indeed, much of Alexander's work draws on the careful analysis of transcripts, and we have used this approach in writing this chapter. Where extracts from classroom talk or reports of classroom activities are used to inform an analysis of practice, it is important to know whether what is being reported are exceptional events that demonstrate what can happen under special circumstances or are typical events that are run-of-the-mill happenings as far as the authors are concerned. It is also good to know whether the evidence is intended to give the account greater depth, to bring it life or to offer inspirational examples.

The choice to look at classroom talk at the very beginning of this book reflects a commitment to understanding how meanings are produced and circulated in classrooms. We could hardly prioritise the voice of the child without drawing on classroom talk. We want to emphasise that looking at how children learn involves looking at how they make sense of their world, and we know this by looking at the way they represent it – that is, the way they use all the symbolic meaning-making devices available to them to show what they have learned and want to say about it. This focus on children's meanings and the many forms in which they might be expressed carries an implicit recognition of the importance of the voices of learners; this recognition is essential if we are to both understand what pupils learn from us and to value their contributions in the classroom.

In making these connections we recognise that the study of primary pedagogy is a value-laden activity. All involved in writing this book have sought appropriate spaces to articulate the values embedded in their work. Without exploring these in detail now, we can note that questions of inclusion, both in terms of additional need and social class, gender-appropriate education and the recognition of cultural diversity, underpin our recommendations for primary practice based on research activity. This spectrum of commitments raises questions of the learning of these particular groups of children in enhancing the learning of all children, as well as considerations of how helpful

it is to group children in this manner. It might be that we end up balancing the tensions of teaching the whole class whilst personalising learning.

Reflection

What opportunities have you observed for children to use talk to support their learning in the classroom? If possible, ask children if they think talking helps them learn. In what ways do they think it helps?

Supporting classroom learning: pupils' and teachers' roles

Debates about teaching have often been premised on psychological accounts of learning and now generally locate learning in a social context (see, for example, Wood 1998). In diverse social contexts teaching may prioritise the nature of children's learning and thus the processes of assimilation, accommodation and adaptation. These Piagetian terms remind us of the ways in which children's thinking responds to experience and that this response is essentially individual. The Piagetian teacher follows the developing pattern of children's thinking, and learning is generated through the perturbation of a learner's existing schema (wobbling their thinking).

An alternative or parallel approach is to prioritise what is worth knowing and to assist children in coming to know what is deemed worth knowing in our culture. In this Vygotskian account of learning, a selection is made based on what is considered worthwhile knowledge, and this cultural selection is chunked (made into handy learner-friendly sized portions) and then structured into a sequence appropriate for the acquisition of the desired skill or knowledge (see, for example, Newman and Holzman 1993). The National Strategies for Literacy and Numeracy in England (DfEE 1998, 1999a) are good examples of this and, as the guidance associated with these documents illustrates, learning is then about recognising and extending the learner's zone of proximal development. Consequently, teaching is about showing and telling, assisting pupil performance through appropriate scaffolding. So the Vygotskian teacher identifies children's positions on a map of learning and arranges talk and activities to take them the next small step along a pre-planned route.

In both of these psychological accounts of learning attention to the voices of the learners is seen as essential for the study of teaching and for teaching itself. For many years classroom studies have shown the importance of the voice of the teacher in determining both the form and content of pupil talk. It is now a common place that the metaphors of scaffolding and handover (Bruner and Haste 1987) are used to describe the ways in which teachers arrange for talk and activity in primary classrooms (see, for example, Tharp

and Gallimore 1988). It often seems that teachers are very good at scaffolding learning, getting the learning chunks the right size, organised in a sequence and embedded in appropriate activity and talk, but are less effective at handing over the activity to children, at giving them the space to make sense of things through their own talk and activity. The metaphors do imply that teachers will help children make their own sense of learning and thus reinforce the importance of listening to the children's voices in classrooms.

Studies of primary classrooms are sometimes concerned with effectiveness and have implications for teaching. One important study (Mortimore et al. 1988) indicates that in the most effective classrooms there are only one or two subjects on offer at any one time. This makes it very difficult for children to follow their unique and specific interests and gives the teacher the job of appealing to learners' interests in a more general way. The individual voice of the child can only be articulated against a backdrop of arrangements made by the teacher for all children. For example, when Jonathan was 9 his class was studying the houses across the road from the school. He wanted to write a story in which the house was haunted by a man who had lived in the house and died of wounds from a war. He found out that the Crimean War fitted the dates he had in mind. He did some independent reading about the war to gain contextual information for his ghost story and then settled into writing a narrative of several thousand words. The articulation of this very individual voice began from a common starting point, but required some very individualised arrangements by the teacher.

A second important study, known as the Oracle study (Galton et al. 1980), focused closely on what went on in primary classrooms. Like the Mortimore study, many issues for primary teaching were reported, but from the point of view of talking and learning perhaps the most important lesson was that classroom interaction is best focused on learning when an adult is involved, and the majority of adult involvement springs from teachers talking to whole classes. It is easy to see how these two studies can lead to a view that effective primary teaching involves a teacher talking to a whole class with a single subject focus. The voices of children may thus be most frequently linked to learning in whole-class settings where the teacher's authority is at its greatest. This focus on learning will most likely be maintained through teacher control of subject knowledge and its boundaries. In such circumstances it is unlikely that the Crimean War will be linked with a study of local housing and an extended piece of creative writing. You can see how arrangements like this make it difficult for learners to experience any explicit control over their learning or for teachers to take up learners' enthusiasms.

The National Literacy Strategy as an example of knowledge-driven pedagogy

A central feature of what it is to study and enhance primary pedagogy is the question of what counts as worthwhile classroom knowledge, and this has

become the subject of a continuing range of policy initiatives. Policy agendas have led to the production of the National Curriculum requirements defining worthwhile classroom knowledge and the prioritisation of English and mathematics and the related pedagogic strategies (The National Literacy Strategy, DfEE 1998; The National Numeracy Strategy, DfEE 1999a). The implementation of these Strategies has provided a focus for the interrogation of classroom practice from a range of perspectives (e.g. Earl et al. 2003; OfSTED 2002a; Lee and Eke 2004). The final report of the external evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLS and NNS) in England asserted they were, with a few reservations, successful policy innovations (Earl et al. 2003). You will find further discussion on the implementation of the NLS in Chapter 2.

OfSTED (2002a), however, in an HMI overview of the Literacy Strategy, reported reservations about the underachievement of pupils in just over half the schools in areas of social deprivation in which good progress was not made. The challenge and potential difficulties of reconciling the Strategy with the requirements for children with special educational needs have also been identified and in particular how whole-class interactive teaching can involve content and discussion that includes all the pupils in the class (Wearmouth and Soler 2001). In this connection the OfSTED report commented favourably on subtle changes in pace employed by a teacher. OfSTED reports are rarely explicit on what they mean by pace and this may not be surprising given the variety of definitions we shall explore shortly. Despite the NLS, the literary achievements of boys and of those pupils with special educational needs or in areas of social and economic deprivation continue to cause concern. It is a real challenge for teachers to ensure the presence of the voices of all learners in the kind of whole-class teaching, promoted by the Strategies, where what counts as knowledge is very tightly defined and time is precious. The NLS in action is one place where we can see how teachers respond to these challenges.

A tight, teacherly, control of talking for learning can be associated with a tight control of the pace of lessons. Bernstein's use of the term 'pace' would suggest both explanations and challenges for the classroom implementation of the NLS. Pacing is defined by Bernstein as the rate at which learning is expected to occur – the speed at which the sequencing rules are transmitted and acquired and thus 'regulate the rhythm of the transmission' (1990: 76).

The NLS lists learning outcomes by school term and by school year and thus has strong pacing. The pacing rules determine when new topics are to be introduced and can be linked to the forms of questions asked and the anticipated duration of pupil response. The form and length of utterance are bound up with each other and so determine who can say what and when. Following Bernstein's (1990) argument, this has two consequences for the present discussion. Since time is at a premium, what counts as appropriate talk, in both length and form, will reduce pupil speech and increase teacher talk. It may be that pace is a central issue for our understanding of teaching