

## Chapter 7: Successes, Challenges and Moving Forward

### Introduction

The OISE/UT team has spent more than four years immersed in the NLS and NNS external evaluation – watching and learning. We have been impressed by the many positive features of this ambitious reform effort, one that combines a clear vision and central steering with resource allocation for training and capacity building in schools. We have been particularly impressed with the flexibility of the Strategy leadership – the vision and the underlying principles have remained constant as the Strategies have adapted in response to evidence about their effectiveness and problems that have arisen. In this final chapter, we draw some conclusions about the development and sustainability of the Strategies and highlight what the Strategies have contributed to the knowledge base for large-scale education reform.

Throughout the preceding chapters, we have reviewed evidence from a range of sources, examined primarily through the lens of our framework for viewing such large-scale reform. We have examined the view from the centre, from the “bridge” and from schools, showing how these perspectives reveal some of the issues and dilemmas to be expected in

such a complex national initiative. In this last chapter we are shifting more explicitly to the critical friend role. In addition to looking at the implications of the data gathered in our interviews, observations and surveys, we draw on the international literature and our own experience with education reform in many other jurisdictions.

We summarise key NLS and NNS successes and challenges in this concluding chapter. Somewhat paradoxically, the challenges are often embedded in the successes. While the gains to date have been impressive, there is still considerable ground to be covered if significant and lasting improvement is the goal. Finally, we raise questions with respect to the next phase of reform, acknowledging the complexity of the issues and the difficulty of the dilemmas faced by the government.

### Successes

NLS and NNS were launched with considerable publicity and fanfare – the Strategies were hard to ignore. Although media attention subsided and the momentum slackened somewhat, NLS and NNS have maintained the priority of literacy and

mathematics in primary schools. The Strategies have had an impressive degree of success, especially given the magnitude of the change envisaged; in many ways they have succeeded in the goal of transforming the nature of the country's primary schools.

### **Influence on Teaching and Learning**

The Strategies have moved literacy and mathematics to top priority in classrooms across the country. Our data indicate that the majority of teachers are in agreement with the directions taken by the Strategies and see themselves as implementing the changes in their schools. Almost all schools have received some training for both NLS and NNS and teachers believe that their own learning has been positively affected. Initial teacher training has also seen an increased emphasis on teaching of literacy and mathematics and the use of the Strategies.

There is little doubt that English primary schools have changed considerably since the introduction and implementation of the Strategies. Up to the early or mid 1990s, schools were characterised by a predominance of individualised planning and teaching, with pace largely determined by pupil readiness as perceived by teachers. In mathematics, many teachers used commercial schemes of work, which children worked through at their own rate, often with little direct teacher intervention. The big shifts as a result of the Strategies<sup>13</sup> have been greater use of whole class teaching, greater attention to the pace of lessons, and planning based on objectives rather than activities. Most teachers are using the format and structure of the literacy hour and the three-part daily mathematics lesson,

although most have modified these as they gained confidence. These elements of the Strategies, along with dedicated time for literacy and mathematics, are well established; lessons are becoming increasingly fluid and teachers more confident. Recent HMI reports evaluating NLS and NNS (Ofsted, 2001a; 2001b) state that the quality of teaching has improved over the time the HMI team has been observing their sample schools, although the reports indicate that areas of weakness remain in both literacy and mathematics teaching.

Regional directors, LEA staff and headteachers all report that teaching has improved, and can point to examples of teaching that they see as outstanding. During school visits, we observed many teachers who demonstrated awareness of the different levels of understanding of each of their pupils, establishing curriculum targets for individuals while attending to the whole class and ensuring learning for all. Such teaching is consistent with the implications for teaching of cognitive orientations toward learning, indicating that children's learning can be enhanced when teachers connect new learning to what children already know (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999). As evidenced earlier in this report, however, such outstanding teaching is not the norm. Three and four years into implementation, in spite of tremendous growth, the scope of the capacity building task is revealed as being much larger than had been anticipated.

Throughout the four years of our evaluation, our data consistently revealed differences in the response of teachers to NLS and NNS,

*13 Most observers agree that some of these changes predated the formal launch of the Strategies. The National Literacy and Numeracy Projects developed the core of the Strategy frameworks and approaches, and some schools anticipated the Strategies by beginning to use some elements prior to their official launches.*

with NNS being seen as having a more pronounced and positive impact on teaching. Several possible reasons have been suggested for this difference, for instance, that NNS benefited from coming a year later and “learning from Literacy’s mistakes.” Our data suggest, however, that prior to the Strategies, primary teachers had much greater confidence about teaching literacy than they had about teaching mathematics. Most teachers felt comfortable with their methods of teaching reading and writing – and believed such methods to be effective. For many teachers, methods encouraged by NLS might be quite different from their previous practices. Such teachers expressed reluctance about losing features of their work that they enjoyed and felt were valuable, such as listening to individual children read. When such practices are difficult to sustain, teachers may feel that “something has been lost.” Such a feeling of loss did not emerge from teachers commenting on the Numeracy Strategy. NNS has provided a framework and way of thinking about teaching mathematics that has been more warmly welcomed, partly because teachers saw NNS as an improvement over their previous teaching methods and were less reluctant to abandon their previous practice in favour of a new approach.

It is more difficult to draw conclusions about the effect of the Strategies on pupil learning than on teaching practice. Attainment on the government’s key measures rose significantly even though the 2002 targets were not achieved. In 1997, 63% of children reached the expected level in English, a figure that increased to 75% in 2002. While still short of the target of 80%, this is a substantial gain. In mathematics, 73% of children reached the expected level, short of the target of 75%, but a considerable increase from the 61% of 1997. Furthermore, and perhaps even more

significantly, the gap between low achieving and high achieving LEAs (for both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2) has narrowed – something that Strategy leaders quite rightly see as an impressive accomplishment. If this improvement in the results for low-attaining schools continues, it would be a significant indicator of the success of the Strategies.

An emphasis on failure to reach the 2002 targets may obscure the substantial level of success that has been achieved. Regional directors and consultants are convinced, on the basis of test data and classroom observation, that pupil learning has improved significantly with the use of the Strategies. Our data indicate that many headteachers and teachers also find that the Strategies have had a positive impact on aspects of pupil learning; a much smaller percentage believe that the Strategies have not. Many LEA and school staff report, in addition, that the Strategies have helped to motivate some pupils, thereby leading to future improvements in learning. Our overall assessment is that increases in pupil learning have been considerable.

### **Flexibility Within a Constant Vision**

One of the most striking features of the implementation of NLS and NNS is the way in which Strategy leaders have modified elements of the Strategies (or messages about these elements) in response to information about progress and challenges. The overall vision, set out through the frameworks, has remained constant, but specific priorities and emphases have shifted somewhat in response to data about pupil strengths and weaknesses and to feedback from schools and LEAs. For example, when national assessment data showed that pupils had difficulty with problem solving in mathematics, NNS developed materials and training to address the need. Similarly, NLS focused on

improving children's writing in response to disappointing scores in the writing component of Key Stage 2 English tests. When classroom observations indicated that many teachers had difficulty making effective use of plenary sessions at the end of literacy and mathematics lessons, the Strategies produced videos and print resources to give teachers models to follow. The NLS and NNS communication webs now extend widely and deeply into the education system, allowing Strategy leaders to anticipate problems and to design support materials and professional development aimed at emerging needs.

### **Value for Money**

Many unknown factors complicate the task of estimating the value for money of the Strategies (or any other large-scale reform, for that matter). We outlined the complexities of such analyses at the outset of our study. The cautious conclusion to this point, however, is that a relatively small additional central expenditure (in the region of 4.4% of the overall cost of primary schooling) has levered significant shifts in the use of ongoing resources in schools, such as teacher time and attention. Test results, defined as the main public measure of success, have improved considerably although the 2002 targets were not met. On balance, we have concluded that the Strategies represent good value for money.

### **Establishing a National Infrastructure**

When the Strategies began, those leading the initiative had an image of a training and support network that would eventually take NLS and NNS into every classroom in the country. After four years, with the active engagement of LEAs, the objective has been largely achieved, with the creation and continued development of what we have termed the bridge, linking the centre and the schools. The national and regional directors

provide leadership throughout the country, supporting and monitoring the work of LEAs and developing new initiatives to meet emerging issues. They also oversee the development of national training and curriculum support materials to address particular needs, with the National Literacy and Numeracy Centre (now the National Centre for School Standards) orchestrating the production and distribution of materials.

The national infrastructure has been flexible enough to accommodate government decisions and to meet changing local needs. At the initial launch of NLS and NNS, the challenge was to get the message out to all LEAs and schools, which necessarily suggested a top-down approach. Once the first phase was over, communication became more interactive, with regional directors facilitating the sharing of good practice from successful LEAs, schools and teacher training institutions, as well as continuing to provide steering and leadership. Increasingly, the expertise is located at the local level, with consultants, co-ordinators, leading mathematics teachers and expert literacy teachers providing the support that teachers need, when they need it. In schools, both headteachers and subject co-ordinators are managing the Strategies (and other school improvement initiatives) with increasing sophistication. In higher education, tutors demonstrate growing support for the approaches advocated by NLS and NNS.

This flexible national infrastructure, with increasingly strong interactive links at regional and local levels, provides a strong foundation for continuing the development of teaching and learning in primary schools, LEAs and teacher training institutions.

### High Pressure and High Support

In contrast to policy mantras that stress the advantage of “starting small” it now seems that governments are better advised to “think big, start big,” particularly in the early stages of a large-scale reform agenda. Governments need to push accountability (pressure), and provide incentives and foster capacity building (support) to have a good chance of achieving and sustaining improvements.

NLS and NNS, being among the first education initiatives of the current government, heralded the beginning of a renewed focus on raising standards. Pressure (or accountability) was intense, focused through such initiatives as a revised national curriculum, target setting, and monitoring of NLS and NNS implementation through regular Ofsted inspections. Although the Strategies were not statutory, schools that were not improving or maintaining high standards would have to explain why they were not following the Strategies. This phase of reform can be thought of as *informed prescription* (Barber, 2002). Our data suggest that schools were inclined to acquiesce to, and approve of, such direction, especially for teaching mathematics. Headteachers and teachers often expressed relief that they had been given the NLS and NNS frameworks and curriculum materials to better cope with the pressure from national tests, Ofsted inspections, imposed targets and high workloads.

In addition to this continuing pressure, the Strategies provided strong support, with substantial new money for schools and LEAs. High quality resources and training opportunities provided through the national infrastructure have expanded and diversified over time in response to feedback from teachers and LEA personnel. The sheer

magnitude and quality of resources and opportunities for capacity building have been impressive, with virtually all teachers and headteachers having had some exposure to these materials and training.

The strong emphasis on support through capacity building distinguishes NLS and NNS from many other reform initiatives and would be expected to lead to greater sustainability. The differentiation of pressure and support to schools and LEAs is an effective tool for managing resources and for supporting schools and LEAs with the greatest needs. The Strategies provide the best example we know of a high pressure/high support approach to large-scale education reform.

### Attention to Evidence

Availability and use of data was characterised as one of the challenges facing the Strategies in our second report. Now, however, such attention to relevant evidence can be categorised as one of the successes (Ashby & Sainsbury, 2001). We have been impressed at the change over the last two years in the confidence and competence displayed in LEAs and schools. Given the importance of data and evidence in educational decision-making, people need to be sufficiently *data literate* to interpret and use such information appropriately (Earl, 1995). Achieving such data literacy, especially on a broad scale, is not an easy task; LEAs and schools across England have made considerable progress toward the goal, although both groups show considerable variability in their level of expertise. Progress has been stimulated by the DfES provision of data in more accessible forms and by considerable training and coaching. The government has promoted “evidence-informed policy and practices” (Levačić & Glatter, 2001) and has served as a model for others by commissioning ongoing research

and evaluation studies such as this one, with the results made publicly available.

Our data indicate that schools are becoming more comfortable with the use of reports from DfES, Ofsted, QCA and others. Many LEAs have also collected data of various kinds to support their educational development plans, gathering information through surveys and monitoring, then using this to improve programme planning and teaching, as well as to plan for resource allocation. The challenge for LEAs is to disseminate such information more widely, ensuring that such understanding is not restricted to a small group of experts.

During the latter phases of our data collection, in contrast to visits early in our study, we frequently found schools comfortably and competently using test data and other indicators of pupil, school and LEA performance as an important tool in decision-making. Rather than viewing data as threatening (“shaming and blaming”), headteachers and teachers are increasingly seeing such information as helpful in raising questions and problems. The next step is to increase the proportion of classroom teachers who are comfortable with using data in this way, a challenge that can be met only by further training and in-school support.

### **Assessment Literacy**

Throughout our study we have stressed the importance of teachers developing assessment literacy, in particular the capacity to examine pupil work and performance data and use this information to guide pupil learning. We have seen progress since our last report in teachers’ use of formative assessment in classrooms. Although they continue to be aware of the numerical targets, curriculum targets – specifying what pupils need to learn next –

are now more salient for many teachers. NLS and NNS have emphasised how headteachers and teachers could collect and interpret data that had meaning for them (e.g., curriculum targets, monitoring lessons), while training programmes include explicit attention to formative assessment and feedback. LEA link advisers often work with school staff to assist them in developing school-wide assessment policies. Considerable evidence suggests that standards will be raised when teachers use formative assessment to collect data about pupils’ progress as part of their routine classroom practice (Black & Wiliam, 1998), a practice we increasingly observed in our school visits. Beyond its short-term value in improving pupil learning, engaging in such careful consideration of pupil work is a powerful professional development and school improvement tool in itself, as recognised by NLS and NNS in resources and training they have provided.

The increased use of curriculum targets is linked to the rise in assessment literacy. Over the past four years, the Strategies have moved the conversation at the school level from numerical to curricular targets, shifting the emphasis to teaching and learning. Teachers are focusing on what their pupils need to learn next and how best to help them reach the appropriate curriculum target. These increasing levels of assessment literacy will also boost local capacity at both school and LEA levels, strengthening sustainability in the years ahead.

### **Leadership**

The leadership at all levels of the Strategies has proven to be a notable strength, as demonstrated throughout our data gathering. Although new people have moved into virtually all of the key leadership positions at the centre, and each has a distinctive

approach, the quality of the leadership has continued. In fact, as the Strategies have evolved, the leadership focus has evolved with them. In the early days, the emphasis was on establishing a vision and gaining commitment from a wide range of stakeholders. Leaders moved quickly into launching the Strategies, establishing targets and creating a central team of regional directors who developed resources and mounted a massive professional development programme. Over time, as the emphasis has shifted to sustainability, national and regional directors have moved into a more interactive relationship with the LEAs and the initial teacher training institutions they serve. A striking feature of the central leadership in NLS and NNS has been its flexibility and responsiveness to feedback from many quarters, without defensiveness or rancour.

Leadership in LEAs and schools, as would be expected, is variable and cannot be characterised with a single description. Regional directors, aware of the range of LEAs, support our observations in claiming “we now have a lot of very strong LEA teams – strategy managers and consultants” and see “a remarkable change in how proactive LEAs have become in a support and challenge role.” Shortages of knowledgeable staff can limit LEA effectiveness – line managers may not always have the high level of managerial skill or subject expertise that is desirable. As well, as noted by regional directors, in some LEAs senior leaders are not providing the support and vision that will be needed to sustain improvement over time.

Leadership development at the school level has also been a focus, with considerable attention to building the leadership and management capacity of headteachers and literacy and numeracy co-ordinators, as both

managers and models of good practice. Connections with the work of the National College for School Leadership have brought greater coherence to these efforts. Although there is concern about attracting sufficient candidates for headteaching positions, some of our informants suggest that from their experience, the pool may be smaller but it is of high quality.

*People who are becoming heads now are better prepared and better supported than heads ever have been. There is a much better sense of what leadership is. ... I know it is a cliché but there is a better culture of shared leadership in schools. The role of subject leader particularly has developed.*

(Strategy leader)

## Challenges

A number of issues have emerged from our consideration of the evidence available to the end of 2002. Although we are drawing attention to these issues in relation to NLS and NNS, it is important to note they also contribute to the body of evidence about large-scale reform. Because the literature about reform is largely based on instances of more limited scope and smaller scale, the examples of NLS and NNS are particularly valuable as sources of new knowledge. We hope these insights can spark discussion about how to secure the long-term effectiveness of NLS and NNS.

## Teacher Capacity

There is no doubt that teacher capacity has increased through use of the structure and resources provided by NLS and NNS. The literacy hour and the three-part daily mathematics lesson are ubiquitous (although not all components are always present). HMI reports that the quality of teaching is going

up. However, evidence is mixed about the extent to which teaching has actually changed beyond the adoption of the structure and format of the literacy hour and daily mathematics lesson. If NLS and NNS are going to reap the kinds of returns that Strategy leaders believe are possible, the great majority of teachers will need to be highly skilled and knowledgeable about teaching literacy and mathematics to their pupils. Studies of effective teachers of numeracy (Askew et al., 1997) and literacy (Medwell, Wray, Poulson & Fox, 1998; Wray & Medwell, 2002) found that the most effective teachers had a “connectionist” orientation to teaching, getting children to think and talk about what they were doing and to make connections between different areas and aspects of the subjects. For teachers to work effectively with children’s pre-existing understandings and teach subjects in some depth requires sound knowledge of the content to be taught (Cohen & Hill, 2001). Achieving such mastery on a wide scale is a tall order indeed.

Several UK research studies examined changes in teaching over the last few years. Research during the early phases of NLS implementation suggested that even after two years, some teachers had considerable difficulty with teaching to objectives (Fisher, 2002; Fisher & Lewis, 2002), a fundamental component of both Strategies and one seen by our interviewees as having great potential for increasing pupil learning. Similarly, another study (Mroz, Smith, & Hardman, 2000) found “a notable absence of the higher order questioning and teacher-led discussion which is said [for instance, by Reynolds, (1998)] to characterise interactive whole class teaching.” Many teachers appear to be better at the technical aspects of implementing both Strategies than they are at accurately diagnosing and responding to individual

differences in pupil understanding. Research by the Kings College team funded by the Leverhulme Foundation has also identified questions related to levels of teacher understanding in mathematics (e.g., Askew, 2001). Other research has pointed to some of the dilemmas faced by teachers in implementing elements of NLS (English, Hargreaves, & Hislam, 2002).

The Strategies have done an impressive job of providing teaching resources and good quality training to a large number of teachers – thousands of them across the country. Given the sheer scope of the challenge, however, many of these teachers have not yet had the kind of extended learning experiences they would need to develop a thorough understanding of the Strategies or of the best ways to teach literacy and mathematics to their pupils.

*Training teachers to implement instructional methods when they don't truly understand the underlying rationale is futile. Without understanding, teachers do not have the knowledge to adapt an instructional strategy to address various student needs. Without understanding, teachers become cogs in a machine, with neither the responsibility nor the rewards of being in control. Without understanding, teachers can become inflexible and dogmatic, unable to integrate new research-supported practices into existing approaches.*

(Willows, 2002, p. 1)

A significant finding in our data is the difference between the views of teachers and those of consultants. Consultants (along with regional directors and other observers) believe that many teachers do not yet have the knowledge, skill and understanding they need to make and sustain improvement in teaching literacy and mathematics. Teachers, however,

do not share that view – the great majority believe they do have the necessary skill and knowledge. The discrepancy presents a challenge for policy makers and LEAs.

In Chapter 5, we explored some of the reasons for the discrepancy and suggested how teachers varied in capacity and motivation. Our findings suggest not only that specific skills or knowledge are required for expertise in teaching literacy and mathematics, but also that many teachers “don’t know what they don’t know.” For some teachers, change is limited by their own lack of awareness of inadequacies in subject knowledge or in pedagogical understanding. Regional directors and LEA consultants, reinforcing our own findings, reported that gaps in teacher and headteacher understanding and knowledge were limiting the potential impact of NLS and NNS but that many of those in schools were unaware of such gaps.

This paradox creates a complicated dilemma for policy makers and central administrators. As we suggested in our second report, the initial gains in achievement scores were probably a function of relatively straightforward (albeit effective) changes in teaching practice. The subsequent stall in Key Stage 2 results would seem to support such a conclusion. It will not be easy to increase the proportion of teachers who are expert – teachers who are able to use the Strategies as a foundation for making powerful connections for all their pupils. Making the task more challenging is the belief on the part of so many teachers that the job is done – that they have the knowledge they need and have fully implemented the Strategies. If teacher learning does not become a routine feature of ongoing practice, the principles behind the Strategies may be diluted or distorted by well-intentioned people who are unaware of the

gaps in their understanding. Scepticism, whether or not it is justified, felt by some teachers about the impact of the Strategies, particularly NLS, on pupil learning adds an even greater degree of difficulty to the capacity building task.

### **Embedding Accountability and Capacity Building**

In the early implementation of the Strategies, pressure for compliance with central directives served to engage schools, getting them started with literacy and mathematics changes. However, continuing this kind of accountability for too long may result in a culture of dependence, reducing professional autonomy. When the focus of the government has moved on (as it inevitably will), the responsibility for maintaining a focus on literacy and mathematics, together with a determination to strive for high standards and quality teaching, will need to be embedded in the culture of schools and LEAs.

*Teachers don't come out of training and know all that they need to know about teaching. Teaching is continuously about learning. And ultimately, the best place to learn is in your own school.*

(Regional director)

Sustainability will ultimately depend on everyone in the education system having:

*the recognition that we never know it all and can always learn, develop and improve.*

(Regional director)

Developing this kind of organisational capacity requires more than professional development that concentrates on teaching and pupil assessment, critical as that is.

*Professional development should ... connect teachers to external expertise while also respecting teachers' discretion and creativity. These experiences should be sustained and continuous, rather than short-term and episodic.*

(Newmann, King and Youngs, 2000)

Even with the Strategies' strong focus on building capacity, the magnitude of the task has meant that many teachers have had relatively little opportunity for this sustained professional development and consolidation. The challenge now is finding ways to embed accountability and capacity building in the educational culture. Without such a shift, there is a risk that the momentum that the Strategies have created will be lost. A number of the regional directors spoke of such concerns:

*There will always be a role for us in terms of supporting the ongoing development, whilst obviously we want self-developing, self-sustaining schools. Schools can become very insular places and LEAs have a key role in being able to have a broad picture of all their schools and enabling them to share.*

(Numeracy regional director)

### **Central Direction and Local Initiative**

Researchers (e.g., Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; Huberman & Miles, 1984) have long understood the problems associated with sustaining any initiative after the initial push from policy makers. More recently, Datnow and Stringfield (2000) drew attention to the importance of the local infrastructure in maintaining reforms, while Fullan (2000) concluded that negative school cultures, unstable districts and fluctuating policies all take their toll on the fragile foothold of reforms once the central driving force recedes.

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were centrally conceived and directed. Given the ambitious scope of the intended changes, such an approach made sense. The central direction and support appropriate to the early stages of large-scale reform need to be modified at later stages, where the challenge is to maintain, deepen and broaden the early gains. The Strategies have captured the interest and energy of the majority of headteachers and teachers, although initially many were just grateful at having been given effective tools for dealing with the target setting and the national assessments.

The Strategies were often viewed initially as a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching imposed on a widely diverse range of schools, communities and pupil populations. The Strategy leadership responded to such concerns by emphasising greater flexibility – LEAs and schools have been encouraged to focus on the goal of increasing pupil attainment, with the Strategies providing the means to that goal. LEAs and schools now have more autonomy in how they utilise Standards Fund money. The challenge is to continue to push toward conditions where LEAs, schools and teachers have the capacity to adapt, solve problems and continue to refine their practice, while remaining true to the sound pedagogical principles that underlie the Strategies. Efforts at building professional communities within and across schools, encouraged by SEU and the Strategies, need to be pushed further. All pedagogical stakeholders need to participate in shaping pedagogical knowledge (Dadds, 2001). For long-term sustainability, LEAs, schools and various professional organisations will need to have a stronger leadership role. Headteachers and teachers need to be deeply engaged in innovation, but the process should be integral

to the culture of the school, rather than imposed from outside.

We have referred in earlier reports to the metaphor of organisations having “brains” (Morgan, 1986). In inflexible and hierarchical organisations, the brains are located at the top, thinking on behalf of those in the trenches. But the brain of an agile and responsive organisation is distributed broadly amongst its members, all of whom have a commitment to achieving the organisation’s goals the best way they know how. The distributed brains (in LEAs and schools) need scope and autonomy but also the capacity to carry out their responsibilities well. They need to be clear about objectives and have the skill and knowledge to achieve them. As articulated by a regional director:

*We need to maintain the fidelity to the key principles about teaching and learning but at the same time allow and encourage the ownership that says, “I’m going to move in this way because it suits my children in my cohort.” The professional development now needs to take teachers to where they have the knowledge and can use their knowledge to work with their children.*

(Regional director)

### **Manageability for LEAs and Schools**

Although we are in favour of shifting more responsibility to LEAs and schools, increasing pressure and initiative overload for teachers and headteachers remains an issue. Such concerns, not unique to England, are gaining attention in many other countries, as ambitious large-scale reform inevitably has an impact, both positive and negative, on teachers and their work lives. Although there is considerable support for the focus of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, our data confirm that they have added to teacher

workload, and evidence from a range of sources suggests that teachers often feel overwhelmed. Recent resource materials from the Strategies – unit plans and planning exemplification materials – are intended to ease the planning load while giving teachers concrete examples of a series of lessons that address a group of objectives. Although some individuals raised the possibility of such materials from the centre fostering undue dependency, early indications are that the plans are having a positive effect on teaching.

The pace of reform as experienced in schools is still intense. Virtually all consultants agreed that schools need time to reflect and consolidate before any further central initiatives are introduced. Headteachers reported an almost ceaseless series of new or reworked initiatives raining down from above, making it difficult for schools to maintain their focus on a few key priorities, while the promised reduction in bureaucracy is not yet noticeable. The Strategy directorates, through work with headteachers and literacy and mathematics co-ordinators, have tried to strengthen the capacity for managing NLS and NNS at the school level, although the extent of the impact is not yet clear.

Current government efforts (introduced in autumn 2002) to address workload issues may ease the burden over the next few years through the introduction of new staffing models and different ways of using resources. For instance, the government proposes guaranteed time for planning lessons and for assessing pupils’ work, as well as the provision of adequate leadership time for headteachers and other members of the school leadership group. Our data confirm that manageability needs to be tackled both from the top, through policy means, and from the bottom, through helping schools deal effectively with

external pressures and initiatives. Serious efforts to help schools deal with overload and stress must continue to be a high priority. Failure to improve the situation could have serious consequences, not only for current teachers in terms of daily performance and their willingness to remain in the profession, but also for the attractiveness of teaching as a profession.

### **Targets and Test Results**

Targets or standards and high-stakes testing are among the most contentious elements of large-scale reform. Most would agree that a move toward higher standards is necessary and important. There is less agreement, however, about the way that tests and targets are used in the process. Olson (2001), in the annual report of Education Week in the United States, points out that although testing can be a powerful tool to change what happens in classrooms and schools, such changes are not always positive. Of concern are two practices – diverting time from teaching the curriculum to teaching pupils how to take the tests, especially in the months directly before the tests are given, and shifting time away from non-tested subjects towards tested subjects.

In the early implementation of NLS and NNS, the emphasis on Key Stage 2 tests and setting targets was beneficial in mobilising and focusing the system. However, while targets represent a useful starting point for large-scale reform, they may not be the best strategy for continuing. The high visibility of the 2002 Key Stage 2 targets – the percentage of children who should reach Level 4 – has meant that, in effect, the Strategies were judged, at least publicly, on their success in meeting this one criterion. In the opinion of many of our informants, the Key Stage 2 Level 4 targets of 80% and 75% were set

without much regard to what would actually be possible, while most see the 2004 targets of 85% as unrealistic, at least within that short time frame. The improvement in Key Stage 2 results, rapid until 2000, stalled at that point. One reason for this may be that, as attainment levels rise, further gains will be smaller and therefore harder to detect. Thus, as levels of attainment increase, further improvement is more difficult to measure (Loveless, 2002).

Beyond Key Stage assessments, however, NLS and NNS aim at transforming teaching in the primary school in a variety of ways; their success and impact cannot be fully assessed by a single measure. Strategy leaders, well aware of such limitations, have drawn on a range of indicators in assessing progress and identifying problems, looking at Key Stage 1 results, changes in Levels 3 and 5, as well as findings from HMI reviews and reports from LEAs and regional directors.

In spite of efforts to broaden the indicators considered, Level 4 in Key Stage 2 tests remains the most visible public measure of success. As we have observed, a preoccupation with single achievement scores can have negative side effects, such as narrowing the curriculum that is taught. From the data available to us, we see some evidence that the high political profile of the 2002 national targets skewed efforts in the direction of activities that would lead to increases in the one highly publicised score. Many teachers acknowledged that they “teach to the test” in Key Stage 2 and questions have been raised about whether increases in Key Stage 2 results are specific to the tests used (Tymms, as quoted by Gold, 2002). However, we found little evidence of this happening in Key Stage 1, suggesting that Key Stage 1 data may provide better evidence of increased pupil learning.

We recognise that DfES and the Strategies have been constantly balancing short-term and long-term objectives. The government has been caught in a dilemma – increasing test scores (short-term results) does much to ensure support and funding for the essential capacity building work over the longer term. At the same time, DfES and the Strategy leaders are aware that, with a high political profile and a sense of urgency to show results, they must resist focusing on short-term gains at the expense of more sustainable reform, where gains are steady but not necessarily dramatic (Fullan, 2001). Continuing to set ever higher Key Stage 2 national targets may create difficulties; imposing what schools and LEAs see as unrealistically high targets may undermine the credibility of the target setting exercise and lead to cynicism among educators, decreasing rather than increasing their efforts to improve. We suggest that a shift in emphasis to what might be termed “consolidation targets” could stimulate headteachers and teachers to maintain improvements to date and to address issues identified as challenges in their schools. Such a shift would assume slower rates of overall increases in pupil achievement but stress the need for consolidation and maintenance of gains already made.

The process of national target setting for primary school literacy and mathematics attainment was useful in focusing efforts during the launch and early implementation of the Strategies but further efforts in this direction may require a shift in emphasis if they are to be of value in the long term.

### **The Teaching Profession**

Ultimately, changes in schools happen because of the motivation and capacity of individual teachers teaching children in classrooms. It is important for educational systems to attract,

grow and nurture eager, energetic, knowledgeable and skilful teachers. We have already mentioned growing concerns about current and future difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers, particularly in and around London. The modernisation of the teaching profession continues to be a major focus of the government. Recent government proposals recommend introducing contractual changes to ensure headteachers and other members of the school leadership team get adequate time to carry out their leadership and management roles. All of these initiatives, with considerable potential for influencing the conditions under which teachers carry out their professional responsibilities, have some relevance for efforts to improve the teaching of literacy and mathematics.

As noted above, addressing issues related to workload is a component of the modernisation initiative. The government response to the PricewaterhouseCoopers study and to the report from the School Teachers’ Review Body proposes, among other measures, greater use of teaching assistants and other support staff, stressing that it is vital that teachers spend their time teaching, not doing tasks that can be done by others.

We believe it is crucial to continue to develop and strengthen the profession through such policies dealing with workload, recruitment, initial teacher training, support for newly qualified teachers, teacher compensation and performance appraisal, as well as continuing to develop teacher and leadership capacity.

### **Beyond the School**

The mandate of NLS and NNS has been to improve teaching and learning by changing what happens in primary schools. Although our mandate in carrying out this evaluation

was to study the implementation of the Strategies, it is impossible to do that without some consideration of the context in which these policies have been enacted. In that spirit, we go briefly beyond policies that relate specifically to education and to schools, to address non-school factors that have a significant impact, both directly and indirectly, on children's learning. We look at two areas – support for families and policy-making beyond education.

### *Parents and Families*

The government is well aware of the importance of involving parents in efforts to improve pupil learning. At the beginning of the Strategies, parallel public engagement programmes were launched – the National Year of Reading and Maths Year 2000 – both of which encouraged parents to capitalise on everyday opportunities to strengthen children's literacy and mathematics skills. DfES and the Basic Skills Agency fund family literacy and numeracy programmes in many schools, to help parents whose own levels of expertise are not high. In spite of these efforts, however, the potential contribution that parents can make to children's learning has not yet been realised.

During 2002, government efforts to increase parental involvement took a new turn; the focus expanded to include parental responsibility for children's attendance at school. Although controversial, central efforts to put more pressure on non-compliant parents have increased and seem likely to continue, based on the premise that no matter how good schools are, they cannot do their job if pupils are not present.

At the school level, our site visits revealed that headteachers and teachers are trying to engage parents and meeting with varied levels

of success. Schools in highly disadvantaged communities report particular difficulties, perhaps related to parents' own ambivalence about school, their lack of conviction that education will necessarily improve children's lives or the overwhelming pressures faced by many families in such communities.

Nonetheless, most of our sample schools reported progress, either in increasing attendance at sessions to let parents know about the Strategies and how to help their children, or in daily routines such as having parents listen to children read or write comments on children's work. According to headteachers, the materials that DfES has already produced would not, on their own, be useful with parents whose own levels of confidence and competence are problematic. Such materials seem to assume a level of comfort with text and with schooling that parents in struggling communities may not have.

As a caution, research shows that the kind of parent involvement that can make a difference to pupil attainment is parents' engagement with their own children's learning. In other words, parent involvement in school governance, on its own, will not have this effect.

### *Policy Making Beyond the School*

DfES has been appropriately focusing on the "long tail of under-achievement" and on narrowing the range by bringing up the performance of children with low attainment. The main focus through NLS and NNS has been on the school – what schools can do to improve pupil learning, particularly through changed teaching practice. This makes sense since the government has more direct control over schools than it does over influences outside schools. Improvements in pupil attainment, however, seem to have stalled.

There are still around 25 percent of children who do not reach Level 4, the expected level. Right now the approach seems to be “try harder” or “do similar things somewhat differently,” for instance, delivering catch-up programmes and ensuring quality teaching for all. But, no matter what schools do, it may not be enough.

Pupil outcomes are, we know, shaped by many factors outside the school. The relationship between socio-economic status and educational achievement remains high and is the most stable relationship in educational research. A recent study in the *British Medical Journal* (Jefferis, Power, & Hertzman, 2002), for instance, noting that “social background is a simplification of a lot of complex processes,” found that social deprivation and poverty were strongly related to educational attainment. “The real challenge for educators and policymakers today is to avoid the defeatist myth that schools make no difference without bouncing to the other extreme, that they make all the difference” (Rothstein, 2002, p 12). Perhaps “out of school” influences on pupil attainment deserve further attention. For example, good prenatal and post-natal nutrition means healthier children who may be in a better position to be successful at school, while adequate housing supports stable home lives and reduces interruptions to children’s schooling.

We are aware that the government is already active on these fronts, consistent with a broad view of what is required to support better outcomes for children. Although our mandate was to evaluate the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, we note that such “beyond the school” policies may have a significant impact on children’s literacy and mathematics

attainment and is thus at least indirectly relevant to the standards agenda.

## Conclusion

We believe that much can be learned from this educational reform. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies are ambitious large-scale change initiatives well grounded in research (at least compared with most other change efforts). They have been generally well implemented and well supported by schools (with some caveats concerning perceived rigidity). Although the 2002 targets were not reached, there has been an increase in the Key Stage 2 test scores that DfES defined as the measure of success, plus a substantial narrowing of the gap between the results in the most and least successful schools and LEAs. Although the most obvious features of the reforms appear in virtually all classrooms, our data show considerable disparity across teachers and schools in understanding of the Strategies and in subject and pedagogical knowledge and skill. In many cases the Strategies have not yet produced the needed depth of change in teaching and learning. Such a lag is not surprising given the length of time, but will need continued attention through provision of sustained professional learning opportunities, which should be increasingly embedded in the life and routine of the school. LEAs and schools need to have increased scope and responsibility for such professional learning.

As with all large-scale change efforts, there are inevitable tensions. Questions linger about the appropriate balance between “top-down” and “bottom-up” reform, directed versus flexible implementation, literacy and mathematics versus other curriculum areas, and long-term capacity versus short-term results. Our study also reaffirmed the importance of looking at

a variety of outcomes and measures given the distorting effect that is an unintended consequence of a focus on one indicator of success.

The Strategies have led to significant changes in primary education throughout England in a remarkably short period of time. The shift is pervasive, has moved literacy and numeracy to the top of the agenda and led to significant changes in teaching. But moving to the next phase will not be easy.

The issues we have raised should not be construed as criticisms of the NLS and NNS initiative – the initiative is successful, and that is why these challenges have emerged. Unlike many large-scale reform initiatives, the Strategies have had substantial early success; the crucial next phase of NLS and NNS reform involves:

- deepening and broadening teacher subject knowledge and pedagogical understanding in literacy and mathematics;
- addressing the management of the primary curriculum as a whole, not just literacy and mathematics; and
- continuing to address the structure of the teaching profession and the factors that affect teachers' working lives and, more broadly, recruitment and retention.

Much has been accomplished and this should be celebrated. At the same time, a careful look at the progress of the Strategies reveals no shortage of challenges for future policy and practice.