MANAGING A PARADIGM SHIFT IN LANGUAGE ARTS PEDAGOGY
A CASE STUDY OF EFFECTIVE LITERACY PRACTICE

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The language arts syllabus of Trinidad and Tobago was revised in 1999 to incorporate the latest thinking in literacy practice. Consequently, primary teachers must adopt pedagogies that recognize the holistic, integrated nature of language learning. However, there is still great fragmentation in the teaching of the language arts, despite the syllabus writers' recommendations for integrated teaching. This has resulted in dissonance between the objectives of the revised syllabus on the one hand, and their implementation on the other. This paper presents a case study of one teacher whose pedagogical practices were consonant with what the literature describes as effective literacy practice. Principally, the data that were collected revealed that the teacher's effectiveness derived from: (a) her provision of affective motivation for students to engage in literacy activities, through the use of interesting themes; (b) her use of skill-building in specific areas of the syllabus, such as process writing; (c) her organization of her classroom for literacy immersion; (d) her use of an integrated, holistic approach to instruction; (e) the provision and use of varied resources; and (f) her creativity. The paper argues that primary teachers in Trinidad and Tobago can successfully manage the paradigm shift in language education brought about by the revision of the language arts syllabus, if they adopt the elements of effective practice.

Introduction

Background

Language arts instruction at primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago was guided, until 1999, by a language arts syllabus published in 1975. Upon its publication, the latter syllabus had sparked fierce debate in the
local press about the appropriacy of acknowledging the Trinidad Creole as a second dialect and as a distinct language in its own right (Carrington & Borely, 1978). There was no such controversy, however, when the syllabus was revised in 1999 as the *Primary School Syllabus: Language Arts* (hereafter called the PLAS, or Primary Language Arts Syllabus) (Trinidad and Tobago [T&T]. Ministry of Education, 1999).

Unlike its predecessor, the PLAS (1999) predicates successful literacy learning on a holistic, integrated approach to instruction (p. vii), which reflects improved, cognitivist understandings of how children learn. The PLAS was written in a period of intense research into whole language, content area literacy reading, thematic units, literature study units, and ways of integrating the various language arts, which have found expression in the objectives and activities prescribed by the syllabus. Unlike the previous syllabus, the PLAS requires deliberate linking of language activities and skills across the curriculum, as well as within the language arts. It challenges teachers to develop literacy environments where students can construct meanings from a variety of texts, and it encourages the teachers to make effective links between language and literature. Consequently, the implementation of the core elements of the PLAS depends upon a significant change in teachers’ literacy instruction paradigms. Essentially, the revised syllabus requires a shift from teacher-centred, lecture-type strategies to the kinds of constructivist pedagogies that Klein (1997) says foster learner-independence.

The study that is reported here was based on observations of an experienced, in-service practitioner in her own classroom. It aimed to explore and depict the ways in which the subject of the study, Agatha (her pseudonym), had responded to the demands of the unfamiliar PLAS, which required her to reconceptualize language arts instruction. Given the paradigmatic shift required of teachers, the study posed the following questions: How did the observed teacher respond to the PLAS? In what respects were her literacy practice effective?

**Literature review**

The literature on effective literacy practice comprises two major strands: the first describes effective literacy practices and portrays effective practitioners (e.g., Morrow, 1992; Pearson & Raphael, 1999; Pressley,
Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Turner, 1993); the second explores the reasons for teachers' reluctance to use unfamiliar and non-traditional literacy strategies, and suggests that the resulting pedagogical practices are ineffective (Bean, 1997; Hollingsworth & Teal, 1991). Descriptions of literacy practices have highlighted three major, interrelated contributors to effectiveness: 1) teachers' positive, welcoming attitudes to innovative ideas, 2) use of effective strategies that foster literacy growth, and 3) the creation of classroom environments that are literacy-enabling. Despite these understandings of what contributes to it, however, there is no consensus on what constitutes effectiveness.

In Bromley's (1999) study of writing practices within a literacy programme, for example, effective practice consisted of teachers' willingness to experiment with strategies that could improve students' performance. Consequently, Bromley's research participants possessed a rich repertoire of strategies that included use of extended blocks of time for reading, writing, talking, and sharing, as well as use of writing rubrics, writing workshops, graphic organizers, and thematic units. For Bromley, the teachers were successful because they used "a variety of practices that invite[d] students to engage in and enjoy writing" (p. 173).

For some researchers, effective practice is synonymous with integration of language arts education, especially the thrust towards holistic teaching of language skills. Holistic, integrated teaching is based on the fundamental assumption that the various modes of language are inseparably related. Luna, Solsken, and Kutz (2000, p. 276) attest that, "literacy practices involve the interrelated use of oral language, reading, and writing, which become altogether different practices when decomposed into separate, discrete skills." Similarly, Cooper (1997) declares that:

All aspects of the language arts develop together as learners become literate. Therefore, the major focus of instruction should be developing activities that promote the authentic use of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking using real literature as the basis for learning. (p. 17)
From this perspective, effective practice is demonstrated through the use, for example, of thematic units (Bean, Valerio, & Stevens, 1999; Cooper, 1997; Raphael & Hiebert, 1996; Tompkins, 1998) to encourage students to develop literacy skills for engaging in a variety of discourses.

Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi (1996, p. 378) suggest that students need to be taught in such a manner that they see the connections between the various language modes. For these authors, effective literacy instruction is characterized by "an integration of literacy instructional components." In the research reported by Pressley et al., effective teachers of literacy generally created literacy-rich classrooms. Such classrooms were characterized by displays of students' work, posting of word lists, use of signs and labels, as well as constant reading of stories to children. Furthermore, effective teachers modelled reading, writing, and comprehension; they reinforced learning with lots of practice and repetition; and responded to students' instructional needs both through extensive use of group work and through use of mini-lessons and a slower instructional rate (pp. 370-374). The authors create a picture of classrooms that invite literacy activities through an interweaving of students' language needs with their developmental interests, and with their reading in the various content areas.

Tierney and O'Flavan (1989) define effective teachers and effective teaching in ecological terms. Their effective teachers use integrated reading and writing tasks to create "a literacy environment that empowers student learning and student involvement" (p. 300). The authors present their framework as an alternative to classroom practices that encourage students to become passive learners, emphasizing instead that effective literacy instruction depends on an environment that consists of three major elements: 1) a supportive, literate, thinking community where learners are free to take risks and to experience a diversity of perspectives, that is, it is a place where "language is incessantly reborn" (p. 301); 2) classroom cultures where learners are initiators and decision makers who collaborate with their peers to extend and deepen their own learning; in the process they assume various roles such as "collaborators, facilitators, partners, and apprentices" (p. 301); and 3) teachers who act as "opportunists" by seizing appropriate moments for assuming centre stage in the classroom so that they may, for example, model an important process, or who may decide it is better
to mix with groups so that students may maximize their decision-making power.

The importance of Tierney and O'Flavan's (1989) conceptualization of the literate environment lies in its emphasis on active student learning and independent decision making. These two concepts are central to constructivist pedagogy since meaning making, or knowledge construction, is its focus (Klein, 1997; Lasley, 1998). Although she describes constructivist pedagogy as applied to mathematics education, the principles that Klein outlines are not discipline-specific. She speaks, for instance, of constructivist pedagogy facilitating "personal construction of meaning, problem solving, exploration and invention through collaboration" (p. 278). Thus, teachers must place a premium on providing "the best possible conditions for all students" (p. 278). In the report that follows, I suggest that these "best possible conditions" comprise affective motivation for engaging in literacy activities through the use of interesting themes, cognitive skill-building in specific areas of the syllabus such as process writing, and organization of the classroom for literacy immersion.

The school context and the research participant

Agatha Agard (the research participant's pseudonym) has been a primary school teacher for 27 years, 21 of which have been at her present school. Before she enrolled in a literacy course at the local university, Agatha had obtained her professional certification at the Government Training College and, subsequent to that, she had attempted to keep abreast of the latest developments in literacy instruction by participating in short courses and workshops, especially in reading and composition.

The study was conducted at Valley Primary School, a small denominational school in the capital city of Trinidad and Tobago. The school is over 100 years old, and accommodates approximately 400 male students, many of whose fathers attended the school. There was, therefore, strong support for the work that teachers did, whether through financial contributions to the school, book donations, or book repairs. Agatha taught a Standard 1 class of 28 boys, whose mean age was 7 years.
Methodology

I selected Agatha through purposive sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). I had observed the teaching practices of several students enrolled in a university course on literacy development and found that, from amongst the entire group, Agatha was making the most significant attempt to change her pedagogical style in response to the PLAS. I chose the case study method as the most appropriate means of obtaining and processing data to depict this teacher’s literacy practices (Creswell, 1994, pp. 145-146).

I obtained data from several sources. Interviews were a main source of information, and were of three types: informal conversations; semi-structured interviews with Agatha; and formal interviews with Agatha, her principal, and two of her colleagues. I also observed Agatha’s classroom practice at her school amongst her students. On each occasion that I did so, I made hand-written transcriptions of dialogues between Agatha and her students. I decided to write the dialogues rather than audiotape them because in my previous attempts at audiotaping classroom dialogues I had found that the stationary electronic recorder worked best only where children were within a short range of the microphone.

I made six classroom observations over the course of one school term. On each occasion, Agatha and I reviewed her lesson plans, discussed her aims, and evaluated her strategies for attaining those aims. Finally, I reviewed Agatha’s students’ work for evidence that her approach to literacy instruction was effective. I audiotaped the interviews and later typed the recorded data in a computer programme for analysis through “multiple readings, listing patterns, and discerning themes” (Bean, 1997). I used the coded interview information that was on the computer to support and explain what I had observed in Agatha’s classroom.

Findings

My interviews with Agatha revealed that she conceptualized learners as constant meaning makers across texts. She said, for example, that her lessons aimed to encourage a degree of intertextuality (Lemke, 1992) that
was absent from what she taught before she started the university course, and at one point she said:

"My ‘thing’ is to make learning as interesting as possible. The new method [of fostering intertextual links across books] caters for children’s understanding, whereas the old method was rigid. I stuck to the syllabus, and what I had planned. Now, I allow the children to explore avenues that may have been suggested by other lessons."

Implicit in this statement is an acknowledgement that children construct meanings from the texts that they read, and to which they listen (Lapp, Flood, & Farnan, 1989), hence Agatha’s ability to facilitate their intertextual excursions. In one interview, for example, she described her students’ enthusiastic responses to a reading unit in which they looked at various versions of a popular children’s story, The Three Little Pigs. Agatha reported that the students were able to speak about the effects that the changes in each version had had upon the story, and to link various stories that featured villainous wolves. I witnessed this intertextual awareness one day when Agatha had finished reading a children’s story, Red Hen and Sly Fox. Agatha asked one student to describe the fox’s qualities, and she recorded the responses on the board. Almost immediately, another student suggested that the fox they had just talked about was similar to the one in another story, The Gingerbread Man. Agatha responded quickly by putting the word “fox” on the board in bold letters, and then she elicted adjectives from the class to describe the qualities of foxes. Following this, students wrote the new words into their books and each child created a new end for Red Hen and Sly Fox. Some of these new story endings reflected the portrayal of foxes as cunning and persistent, so that instead of outwitting the fox, Red Hen became the fox’s dinner.

Several times during the various interviews, and in our informal conversations, Agatha professed, “I am a creative person.” “I’m a resourceful person.” Her principal, too, described her as “innovative.” When taken within the context of a career spanning 25 years, these statements suggest that Agatha’s attitude to the challenges that the revised syllabus poses was positive, and optimistic. She conceptualized herself as possessing the creative imagination to implement the new
methodologies and remain open to new ideas. Thus, she was easily able to adopt a concept such as integration of language arts across content areas, as envisioned by the syllabus planners, even though she had never thought about language arts in that way. She did this principally by experimenting with thematic units through which she and her students explored connections among language, social studies, and art and craft. As Simplicio (2000) observes:

In order to be effective, educators and teachers must learn to change as well. Although there are certain basic aspects of teaching that will always remain constant, there are many areas in which teachers must be retrained. (p. 680)

Agatha’s creativity was challenged by the formal organization of instruction in her classroom. In her school, as with the majority of schools in Trinidad and Tobago, language arts components are fragmented across the timetable. Thus, reading, spelling, writing, vocabulary development, and other components are allotted discrete times on the timetable. Consequently, teachers plan and teach different lessons for each component. This fact is acknowledged in the preface to the PLAS, which declares that, “teaching language has been characterized by fragmentation and division among the language modes. ... this fragmentation of the Language Arts promotes an unrealistic view of language and language learning” (p. vii).

Agatha met the challenge to her creativity by disregarding the old timetable, which hindered her from teaching holistically and thematically. In its place, she instituted a language arts block, which gave her extended time for exploring literacy activities. She spoke about the shift, during one of our early interviews as follows:

“We are dealing with a new timetable, because we recognize that you cannot use that old timetable [drafted for the school]. Subjects are not [now] rigidly timetabled. I took down my timetable, I put it in the bin. We work by the clock.”

“I have tried to work in... a big junk [sic] of oral language. We start by chatting, and our journals come in at this hour. If there is any news that they want to share, then they write about it.
Then we go into the written language. We focus on some aspect of writing they need to do. In the reading, I do my grammar. My structural analysis comes in after the reading lesson, if we get any particular structures that we want to look at."

Two of the six occasions on which I observed Agatha were morning sessions, immediately after the school had conducted religious instruction. I noted that, as she described in the interview, Agatha began the day with a block of language arts that spanned approximately two hours. She was able to make natural transitions and connections between speaking and writing, for example, through this block. As she indicated, there was considerable opportunity for student talk: "a big junk of oral language." An example of how this worked occurred one Wednesday morning when I visited Agatha's class. The boys were very excited because an international circus had come to Trinidad, and had set up operations not far from the school. Agatha used the boys' obvious excitement to achieve specific curricula objectives. First, she elicited their feelings about the prospect of visiting the circus, in an oral session that lasted for approximately 15 minutes, during which time almost everyone had an opportunity to speak. All the students initiated their responses in Trinidad Creole and had to be reminded several times that they should use Standard English (SE). Agatha did not insist, however, that they "correct" or recast their Creole sentences into SE; she chose instead to accept what had been uttered, while insisting that they should practise speaking the SE. This is exemplified in the following dialogue, reproduced from my hand-written notes of the lesson:

Agatha: "Ok, Shawn, let's hear you. What do you expect to see?"
Shawn: "Miss, I feel they have lions, and tigers and t'ing. You know? It bound to have ah elephant and t'ing. I feel it will have people flying from rope and...."
Agatha: "Wait Shawn, remember what we said last day about using Standard English? Can you say what you have to say in Standard English?"
Shawn: "Yes Miss, I feel people will be flying from a rope."
Agatha: "Swinging from ropes?" [Putting emphasis on the sibilant]
Shawn: "And they will catch each other, I mean other's hands, Miss."
Agatha: “Thank you, Shawn. Does anyone know what those people are called, the ones who fly through the air?” [No response from the class]
Agatha: “Nobody ever heard of an acrobat?”
David: “Oh, yeah! I see that on TV once. It had some people trying to save a dog. . . .”
Agatha: “David, can we say, ‘It had some people’ any other way?”
David: “There were some people, Miss.”
Agatha: “But would you say, ‘There were some people trying to save a dog?’
David: “Some people were trying to save a dog, and they had to do that.” [Pointing at the word ‘acrobat’ on the board]

For the rest of the language arts block that morning, Agatha drew upon the circus theme: she wrote the word “acrobat” on a strip of bristol board and posted it on the word wall at the back of the class; she did a lesson on adverbs; and she had students write a story entitled, “The circus comes to town.” In the lesson on adverbs, the class focused on the opening night of the circus and students, working in pairs, produced sentences such as, “The lion roared [sic] angrily.” “The crowd smild [sic] happily when the clown fell.” “The monkey rode the bike crazily.”

Following this activity, there was a smooth transition to story writing. Agatha placed students into groups of four and had them engage in brainstorming and prewriting, which are preliminary activities of the process writing method (Cooper, 1997). It was apparent that students were accustomed to using this approach, and they organized quickly into groups and began discussing the topic; afterwards, students wrote individually. Although at the end of approximately half-hour of writing, the majority of students had not finished their stories, it was not for want of ideas. Instead, the typical story flowed over 30 lines, albeit characterized by invented spellings (Cooper, p. 172) and frequent subject/verb disagreement. In contrast, the students of the adjoining Standard 1 class were reluctant writers who grudgingly produced eight to ten lines of prose regardless of the topic that they were given, according to their teacher.
I interviewed Agatha at my office several days after I had observed the lesson described above, and she commented that her approach to teaching writing used to be traditional: students used to write because it was a syllabus requirement, and she "was very guilty of using the red pen." She said that her exposure to writing theory (in the university course on literacy development that she was taking at the time) prompted her to abandon this method in favour of encouraging volume in children's writing. She came to believe that students would develop editing skills when they recognized the connection between proper editing and accurate reception of meaning. She described her practice in the following way:

"I let them write unrestrictedly. I allow invented spelling. I haven't taught them to edit, but they help each other with spelling. They are learning to help each other spell and to edit each other's work. There is much sharing and discussion."

I saw numerous instances of this type of collaborative writing and of peer editing when I visited Agatha's classroom. On one occasion, for example, the class was writing a continuation of the popular children's story, *Chicken Licken*. The boys were working in groups of three, and the group closest to where I was sitting got stuck on the spelling of the word "entirely." Despite their best attempts as a unit, they were not getting the letter *r*, but they knew that their spelling was wrong. Agatha stood aloof, allowing the students to use their own resources (which included asking me). Eventually, they spelt the word "entitle" and continued with the story, safe in the knowledge that Agatha would not upbraid them for faulty spelling.

At the end of the writing session, and following group presentations, Agatha went to the chalkboard and elicited spellings from the class for the various words that had been misspelt. Though this method corrected many of the errors, she was still obliged to give students the correct spelling of remaining misspelled words. Following this, Agatha wrote the new and difficult words onto strips of cardboard that she affixed to the word wall, posted on the eastern wall of the class. Her word wall comprised four sheets of orange-coloured bristol board, onto which she had drawn a brick wall, as well as Humpty Dumpy sitting on that wall. My perusal of students' written work indicated that their progress
towards conventional spellings was slow, but normal. Typically, students spelt using phonetic patterns and frequently ignored conventional forms even when these were in written texts before them.

Agatha’s adoption of mini-lessons as an instructional strategy was another example of her determination to make her classes both constructivist in design and flexible to students’ needs. Mini-lessons are instructional periods of approximately 10-15 minutes duration, aimed at small groups, on a specific topic (Cooper, 1997; Tompkins, 1998). Agatha did not know about mini-lessons before her enrolment in the literacy course, however, her initial experimentation with them was successful enough for her to include mini-lessons in her repertoire of pedagogic strategies. While reading with her class, for example, Agatha’s practice was to seize the opportunity to teach related language lessons the moment that they arose. In an informal conversation one day, she spoke of her practice as follows:

Unlike before, now I teach many mini-lessons when children stop me during a story to ask questions and make comments. Before, I used to give a brief explanation. I wanted to cover the syllabus. Now I can get in an entire vocabulary lesson in reading class. Children are learning. They are using it [new vocabulary].

The alternative to Agatha’s method is to defer teaching the vocabulary associated with a reading lesson until the slot designated for vocabulary work on the timetable. However, such a method decontextualizes learning, since the teacher must then create a series of texts from which to teach the vocabulary (Cantrell, 1999; Wray, Medwell, Fox, & Poulson, 2000). As Agatha noted in the interview, the students used the new vocabulary in context, so learning occurred. Agatha’s method of seizing the “teachable moment” (Morrow & Asbury, 1999, p. 61), that is, opportune moments that can be used for teaching relevant concepts and topics as and when they arise, fostered connections between what students knew and what they were learning.

In the preface to the PLAS (1999), the authors indicate that the document views language as “an integrated, holistic, collaborative activity” (p. vii).
Consequently, the syllabus includes the following features and instructional approaches:

- a category labelled "connected activity," which suggests possible links to other content areas
- process writing
- a focus on literature and its "organic relationship with language"
- reading-writing connections
- the language experience approach.

These features of the PLAS are significantly different from the approaches of the previous syllabus. To be effective within the new paradigm of the PLAS, a literacy practitioner must be proficient in each of the features or areas previously referred to. Such proficiency requires a knowledge of and willingness to teach language as an integral part of all content areas (Morrow & Asbury, 1999). Moreover, it requires that the teacher bring creativity to the planning of lessons, since the syllabus is not written as a thematic document. The PLAS, like its predecessor, is laid out in component parts: there are discrete sections for grammar, reading, writing, literature, visual literacy, vocabulary, and other topics. The onus is on the teacher to integrate language activities across the content areas using, for example, thematic units that permit exploration of a variety of language activities and language objectives.

Agatha’s integration of craft and language arts was immediately obvious to anyone entering her classroom. "Multiple meaning man" hung from a line that spanned the width of the classroom. Clowns were tacked onto a flannel board at the front of the class, and fishes shaped like hands were stuck to a board at the back of the class. "Multiple meaning man" was a class project that involved students in the making of stick figures, which taught them homonyms and homophones. The project was part of a large theme entitled "all about me," which Agatha had planned around a series of science lessons.

During one of my visits, Agatha informed me that each child had made a cardboard skeleton to show the various parts of the body, for science class. Out of this, they did writing on multiple-meaning words such as chest (part of the body, as well as large, strong box), sole (part of the body, as well as alone, or type of fish), and nose/nows. The exploration
of homonyms and homophones entailed dictionary work, and then
students wrote sentences that presented the multiple meanings of each
word. Following this, students labelled the various parts of the body.

In social studies, students looked at the ways in which each of them was
special. They wrote about the things that distinguished their birthdays,
such as their mother’s condition at their birth, the meaning of their
names, as well as information about their families, and the things that
they liked. Like Pottle (1998), who integrated language arts, science, and
math, Agatha’s instructional philosophy is illustrated when she says
about the unit, “I was able to get social studies, religious studies, art,
mathematics, language arts. I take everything I can get out of the
themes.”

In an interview that I had with Agatha towards the end of the present
study, she said that she had created a class culture that promoted
reading. She said, for example, that she encouraged children to bring
books to school, which they shared with the class. Agatha related one
instance when she read a rhyme about old Mother Hubbard, which
contained only two verses. The next day, a child brought to class a
version that contained 12 verses. Agatha promptly invited him to sit in
the “author’s chair” at the front of the classroom, and to share his version
with the rest of the class because, as she described it, “students love to
share what they read with each other, as well as to read to each other.” I
observed on most of my visits, that once students had finished their
assigned work they seemed to take story books voluntarily from the
small library that stood at the front of the class. They then sat on low
chairs in various parts of the classroom reading uninterruptedly until
Agatha was ready to do an activity with the entire class. When I
commented upon her students’ reading behaviour, Agatha revealed that
some of her students were reading three grade levels above what was
acceptable for Standard 1 children, when measured on the Dolsch Basic
Sight Word Test. She attributed this reading proficiency to her careful
mix of a basic phonics programme with interesting, enjoyable literature.

In concluding this portrait of Agatha, it is important to note that her shift
in literacy practice occurred at a school that welcomed innovations. This
was apparent from the following remarks that the school’s principal
made during an interview that I had with him at the inception of the present study:

"I tend to give teachers a free hand, you know, I give them a free hand once they say, 'Sir, I want to do this, this is what we plan to do' and I give the go ahead. You see the thing is that they are in the field, they are teaching so if they want to try something, then let's see if it works. You will then have something that you can share, so you can tell people, 'well, try that.'"

The principal's attitude made it possible for Agatha to reorganize her class timetable and teach language arts as she saw fit. Also, it permitted her to do two things outside of her classroom: first, she organized the teachers on her floor of the building (the Infant department and the other Standard 1) to teach language arts thematically; and second, she shared new ideas and new ways of fostering literacy that had worked for her. Her colleague in the adjoining Standard 1 class captured Agatha's infectious enthusiasm in the following interview statement:

"Agatha is from the old school, you know. She was very, very surprised that it could work. You know, this new approach because she was an advocate of teaching like, let's just say that you want to teach nouns then she used to teach it by itself. Then she realized there is a different way to do this, and she came to me and said, 'I'm benefiting from this and I think we can all come together and work that way.' We did theme teaching on topics such as animals where we worked on nouns, adjectives, sentence structure. . . so she was totally amazed and I think she kind of swept us along with it. I did not really mind because I was stuck with my group especially with their writing, so actually seeing her using the things and seeing it working. . . I would say we benefited greatly from what she did."

The fact that Agatha was able to sweep her colleagues along in her excitement over what she was learning suggests their own openness to change, and hints at an institutional attitude to learning about teaching. It is echoed too, in the principal's characterization of his school as a "workshop," and in his decision to use teachers who had completed the
Certificate in Education course at the local university as subject facilitators (responsible for coordination of lesson planning and acquisition of resources) because, as he said, "we have ongoing training and workshop development in the school." Agatha's shift of paradigms, then, occurred within a school climate that welcomed change and encouraged risk taking.

Conclusion

The data obtained in the classroom of the literacy teacher portrayed here suggest that her success in implementing the objectives of the PLAS depended upon an array of elements: her provision of affective motivation for students to engage in literacy activities through the use of interesting themes; her use of skill-building in specific areas of the syllabus, such as process writing; her organization of her classroom for literacy immersion; her use of an integrated, holistic approach to instruction; the provision and use of varied resources; and her creativity. The last, especially, is crucial to what occurred in Agatha's class, and what must, by extension, occur in all schools if teachers are to meaningfully adopt the PLAS.

Agatha's references to what she learnt on the literacy course at the university underscore the need for teachers to engage in frequent retraining, so that their instructional philosophies and practices may benefit from the latest thinking in literacy research. It is apparent that in areas such as composition and the use of thematic units, Agatha's practice changed significantly due primarily to her recognition that the new methods worked better than the old ones. The anecdotal evidence that I collected suggests that Agatha was able to change paradigms in a very short period, because she had a history of undertaking self-improvement projects. Her response to the novel ideas that she encountered was, therefore, not one of initial resistance. This evidence supports the findings of Harris (1998) whose review of the literature on effective teaching suggests that effective teaching is linked to "reflection, enquiry, and continuous professional development and growth" (p. 183).

The findings of this study confirm that many opportunities exist for implementing the objectives of the PLAS in Trinidad and Tobago. Furthermore, there is encouraging evidence that the knowledge
imparted in a university course can alter a teacher’s pedagogy, even to the extent of changing instructional paradigms. Further research may explore the types of interventions that are required to shift teachers’ instructional paradigms when these are not self-motivated. Also, based on the type of interactions that the subject of the present study was having with her colleagues, future research may examine the influence that effective, innovative teachers have on their less innovative peers, or peers who have not been through teacher training for some time.

References


