Reading Reform Foundation

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Old and New Research on Reading

Contents

Reading Reform Foundation Committee Members:

Dear Readers,

It is fourteen years since Mona McNee established the Reading Reform Foundation in the UK and wrote the very first newsletter. This is the 50th newsletter. Despite every effort it has taken a very long time to reach the point of Professor David Hopkins convening a seminar on behalf of the government (17 March 2003) "to look at recent research evidence and programmes about phonics, and how these could inform the future development of the NLS". I dare not envisage the outcome, because I simply cannot understand the mindset and behaviour of so many people in educational and political authority past and present. This could be a momentous occasion, but will the DfES really bite the bullet?

Keith Stanovich puts his finger on one of the greatest problems in the reading debate. I have chosen several extracts, with Stanovich's permission, from an old article 'Romance and reality' (p.6). My purpose for this is multi-fold. The extracts are interesting in their own right, but serve to point out that people are unduly fickle about research results either 'liking' or 'not liking' them. It seems to me that people frequently chose to ignore or dismiss research that does not coincide with their philosophies or beliefs. Is this what happened when the original National Literacy Strategy framework was drawn up? Stanovich describes how our teaching practices ought to be informed by science which would then give teachers freedom from the 'authority syndrome' (p.9). Why have the National Literacy Strategy programmes not been scientifically tested? Were the authors keen to perpetuate their own ideas and pedagogic preferences instead? Why does the NLS promote reading instruction methods which are anti the existing research?

The selection of old and new research in the RRF newsletters serves to demonstrate that some people have long understood the need to learn the alphabetic code to automaticity, the need to sound out and blend (synthesise) for the efficient decoding of text, the dangers of learning words as whole shapes to accrue an initial sight vocabulary, and the dangers of guessing words from pictures, context clues and initial letters. This is not new information and the research literature is out there in abundance. In any event, many of us have made identical observations when hearing children read and when teaching children to read even BEFORE learning of the research. In the light of ordinary teaching experiences, in the light of the research literature, in the light of HMIs' call for phonics teaching for many years and in the light of the excellent results of more recent synthetic phonics research and practice in the UK, <u>why</u> have the National Literacy Strategy managers promoted a mix of whole language reading instruction methods with a smattering of phonics thrown in – the very formula discredited by so much research and so many people. Who is responsible for this and why has there been no formal inquiry since?

Many international researchers and scientists have even gone to the lengths of signing joint statements such is their collective concern about the perpetuation of anti-research whole language practices; for example, as encapsulated by the Reading Recovery programme (p.16, RRF Newsletter no.49). I include an example (p.10) which describes how ineffective teaching stems from 'defective teacher-training'. It is arguably mistraining by the teacher-trainers which misleads teachers in their understanding of how best to teach reading. Students are taught that there is 'no one way' to learn to read as the rationale behind giving them a range of reading strategies. Charles Richardson describes the dangers of this rationale in his article (p.12) as he notes the differences between subjective and objective readers. Which type of reader would parents choose for their children to become if they understood the differences? Ruth Miskin's nonsense word test (p.17) can be used to assess whether the reader is looking at words 'as wholes' or decoding accurately and phonically all-through-the-word. It is quick, easy to use and very revealing. Teachers to this day are not made aware of what results are possible with the best systematic synthetic phonics teaching. And they are unaware of the dangers of a lack of explicit phonics, the dangers of learning words as whole shapes and the dangers of guessing words from clues. Most teachers have trusted what they have been told, including the discredited reading instruction advice of the National Literacy

Strategy. It is time people were less trusting and required evidence to support government and LEA generated initiatives.

Ofsted's latest report on the four years of the National Literacy Strategy (p.19) makes it perfectly clear that failure rates are still too high, particularly the boys (p.23) and yet Ofsted deliberately avoids any mention of 'synthetic phonics' describing this title as 'jargon'. The RRF has informed the Department for Education and Skills over and again that synthetic phonics teaching results in no gender gap, but this has been totally and inexplicably ignored. Bonnie Macmillan's article (p.23) explains why the gender gap is prevalent in England – note that Bonnie wrote her article six years ago. Dare we calculate just how many boys have been needlessly failed by the reading instruction approach of untested theories over the years - and right now?

As the RRF produces this 50th newsletter, shall we see a breakthrough following the phonics seminar after years of astonishing delusion and closed minds. Will science, classroom evidence, common sense and accountability prevail at long, long last?

RRF Governing Statement

The Reading Reform Foundation is a non-profit making organisation. It was founded by educators and researchers who are concerned about the high functional illiteracy rates among children and adults in the United Kingdom and in the English-speaking world.

Based on a wealth of scientific evidence, members of the Reading Reform Foundation are convinced that reading failure is caused by faulty instructional methods. A particular fault of these methods is that they under-emphasise the need for children to be taught the alphabetic code: the way in which individual speech-sounds (phonemes) are represented by letters and combinations of letters. The United Kingdom chapter of the Reading Reform Foundation was set up in 1989 to promote the teaching of the alphabetic code in a research-based way, and this remains its main aim.

The governing principles are to:

- promote research-based principles of reading instruction
- promote the use of scientifically proven reading instruction programmes
- promote the use of standardised reading tests at frequent intervals
- provide information about effective teaching methods
- work to ensure that governmental departments become accountable for the effectiveness of the educational programmes they promote
- disseminate information through a newsletter and website on an ongoing basis

Readers' Letters

Dear Debbie,
At the end of my article in RRF newsletter no. 48, a mention was made of a pen pals scheme I am setting up for young people with specific learning difficulties. LAFS (Letters and Friendships) has now finished a successful pilot project. Over forty young people from the UK requested pen pals. Children also wrote in from the USA not to mention a NATO Army Base in Belgium. We are delighted to have now been awarded a *Champions for Change Award* (National Lottery Money) to develop the scheme further.

The scheme is for any young person between age five and twenty five with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia or dyspraxia. Those with conditions such as ME are also welcome as ME often causes dyslexia-like symptoms. The scheme is free and puts young people in touch by letter, email or audio-tape.

The idea is that young people can communicate with others of the same age in exactly the same situation. They chat about the pros and cons of having such conditions and anything else under the sun. Useful tips are also swapped. *"My pen pal told me about mountain trikes,"* reports one eight year old with dyspraxia, *"Now I can ride with my friends. I do not wobble any more."* Another child commented that he was the only dyslexic boy in his class, adding, *"I do not know anyone else like me."* LAFS is also an opportunity to increase literacy skills in a friendly, low pressure environment. Above all, it is intended to be fun. More young people are joining on a regular basis and are keen to get chatting. If anyone knows a young person who might enjoy having a pen pal please write or email for further information.

Helena Michaels, LAFS, PO Box 31756, London SW15 3XL
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Dear Debbie,
I enjoy reading your newsletters and was particularly interested in the article on assessing reading by part-decoding and part-guessing as this method of reading is certainly one that I see very often with young adults. It is very difficult changing the method someone has been using for many years, especially when some people are able to get by so well reading in context that it is sometimes difficult to see the extent of their problems.

I don't know if you have had the opportunity to look at the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum but I am horrified to see it is still promoting whole word processing. For example:

"Adults should be taught to:

- Possess a limited, meaningful sight vocabulary of words, signs and symbols
- Know and apply some techniques for recognising words on sight; length, shape, initial letter combinations, association with other words"

This comes before:

- "Decode simple, regular words
- Understand that own language experience can be used when reading to help predict sense and meaning of words
- Understand that illustrations and other graphics can give clues to the likely meaning of individual words"

Finally:

- "Understand that written words correspond to their spoken equivalents and are composed of letters in combinations, to represent spoken sounds."

It gets worse:
Under sample activities, one suggestion is that the student draws an outline around personal key words to identify word shape and trace with their finger.

I sincerely hope that the National Literacy Strategy is better than this. (Name and address supplied.)

[Editor's comment: The NLS is pretty much along these lines so it is plain to see just how widespread whole language ideas still remain. I was horrified during a recent parents' evening for one of my own children when the English teacher told me that 'research shows that spelling is improved when the student draws a line round the word'. Where on earth is this idea coming from? Has anyone heard of such research? I would be pleased if anyone could enlighten me!]

Dear Debbie,

An Intervention Programme Too Far.

We've had fun in our LEA making up alternative meanings for the acronym FLS as we had to deliver the training on it FOUR times in the autumn term. Flipping Literacy Support, and Full-Colour Literacy Support were two of the more printable ones!

However, I have decided that, for me, FLS stands for Final Literacy Straw. I can no longer stand in front of an audience of my fellow teachers and tell them that the reason so many of their children need these intervention programmes is because they have not been getting QFT.

What's QFT? Oh, sorry, that's Quality First Teaching. All these teachers in Y1 should be doing it, so we don't need ELS, all the Y3 and Y4 teachers should be doing it so we can do away with the need for ALS, and Y5 teachers, well, they have to do it so the poor Y6 teachers won't need to do booster classes and Easter and Saturday schools to get their children to achieve their end of key stage 2 literacy targets. And as we know, that would mean the NLS might continue to "stall."

But these teachers sitting in our audiences need another sort of QFT - Quality First Training (something they rarely get from their Teacher Training Institutions) - and they should in no way be blamed for the large numbers of children who are still well below where they should be for their age.

I've been a Literacy Consultant since the days of the National Literacy Project in 1996. Back then there was so much that needed to be done. I vividly remember John Stannard the NLP's National Director telling the original group of consultants that what we must do is get rid of the long tail of under-achievement that we have in this country - around 25%.

Well, here we are 6 years later, and the long tail is still there. We have had the monopoly on in-service training during this time. Training on phonics, shared and guided reading, spelling, grammar, and reading and writing non-fiction texts. We've worked really hard as Literacy Consultants to deliver this training and back it up with support in schools. I know we can be proud of many positive things the Strategy has achieved.

BUT... it all hinges on this: Was this training that we delivered EVIDENCE BASED? Did we have proof that we were promoting the best possible good practice? Did we evaluate our pilot intervention programmes before we rolled them out? Who wrote the training materials? Where was the accountability?

When ALS first came out, it was said to be a "temporary necessity" as there were children in KS2 who hadn't had the benefit of 3 years of Literacy Hours in YR and KS1. Temporary? I must look up the meaning of that word again, because ALS is going to be revamped, bigger and better, as we STILL have children coming up from KS1 who can't read and write properly.

We can't put all the blame for the Strategy's failings on "ineffective Heads", "under-performing schools" weak Y3 phonics teaching, and BOYS! (they get the blame for everything these days!) The blame lies with us and the Teacher Training Institutions, and the government. Over and over again teachers have said "*I need this intervention programme with my whole class*" or "*what about the children who fall below the FLS screening requirements, what do we do with them?"*

And increasingly, "*How do we organise all these intervention programmes, ELS, ALS, FLS, Springboard maths? Our TAs will have to sprint around the building to deliver them all*." Oh, that's easy, just appoint an intervention programme manager on the SMT to oversee them all we tell them, which basically means, YOU sort it out, it's YOUR problem.

(continued)

Schools are beginning to say "*enough is enough*". The Strategy should too. We need to look at schools (many in economically disadvantaged areas) which do manage to teach ALL their children to read and write properly. Their success is well-documented. Their teaching IS EVIDENCE BASED. They teach SYNTHETIC PHONICS early and fast. They don't need ELS, ALS or FLS. They don't have gender gaps. Why are we ignoring them? We should stop being defensive and admit that we got it wrong.

I can only stay as a Literacy Consultant if the Strategy fully embraces Synthetic Phonics, admits it was wrong, and spends a fortune on glossy, full-colour training packages on synthetic phonics with INSET for all teachers (and Heads). Or, they could hand this training over to people who actually understand it, like the experienced practitioners, devisers and researchers of the leading synthetic phonics programmes.

If not, I shall have to leave before PLS comes along, (Pensioner Literacy Support) and we fail yet another generation of children and their teachers.

Lesley Drake - Literacy Consultant, London Borough of Newham. Writing in a totally personal capacity.

[Editor's comment: Lesley, you are very brave to speak out in this way. The only thing I don't agree with you about is the glossy, full-colour training packages! I would like to see simple, plain, training packages. The RRF believes that the teaching principles and references to relevant research could be produced in thin, inexpensive booklets. We also think that there is a need for, say, videos or DVDs of a well-produced documentary-style training programme which all schools and pre-schools could acquire. The RRF has always maintained that good teaching of reading is not about more money. All we see nowadays is money being thrown down the drain! I dread to think how much money has been spent on government and LEA generated glossy manuals in recent years. How many sit gathering dust on shelves?]

Romance and reality

by Keith E. Stanovich

Extracts taken from *Romance and reality* Stanovich, K. E. (1993). The Reading Teacher, 47(4), 280-291. Reprinted in: Stanovich, K. E. (2000). Progress in Understanding Reading: Scientific Foundations and New Frontiers. New York: Guilford Press.

Over nine years after this article was published in 'The Reading Teacher', we are still not paying heed to Stanovich's observations that the reading process should be informed by science, whether or not we like the answers...

Stanovich reviews significant findings from his research and speculates on differential responses to his work. He argues that we must let scientific evidence answer questions about the reading process.

Research I have done that almost everyone likes

Even more popular has been my work on Matthew effects in reading development (Stanovich, 1986). The term Matthew effects derives from the Gospel according to Matthew: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" (XXV:29). It is used to describe rich-get-richer and poor-get-poorer effects that are embedded into the educational process. Herb Walberg (Walberg & Tsai, 1983) had focused attention on the process by which early educational achievement spawns faster rates of subsequent achievement, and in a 1986 paper I specifically explored the idea of Matthew effects in the domain of reading achievement. I outlined a model of how individual differences in early reading acquisition were

magnified by the differential cognitive, motivational, and educational experiences of children who vary in early reading development.

In that particular paper, I detailed several developmental mechanisms that are of continuing theoretical and empirical interest. Put simply, the story went something like this: Children who begin school with little phonological awareness have trouble acquiring alphabetic coding skill and thus have difficulty recognising words. Reading for meaning is greatly hindered when children are having too much trouble with word recognition. When word recognition processes demand too much cognitive capacity, fewer cognitive resources are left to allocate to higher-level processes of integration and comprehension. Trying to read without the cognitive resources to allocate to understanding the meaning of text is not a rewarding experience. Such unrewarding early reading experiences lead to less involvement in reading-related activities. Lack of exposure and practice on the part of the less-skilled reader further delays the development of automaticity and speed at the word recognition level. Thus, reading for meaning is hindered, unrewarding reading experiences multiply, practice is avoided or merely tolerated without real cognitive involvement, and the negative spiral of cumulative disadvantage continues. Troublesome side effects begin to be associated with school experiences, and these become a further hindrance to school achievement.

Conversely, children who quickly develop efficient decoding processes find reading enjoyable because they can concentrate on the meaning of text. They read more in school and, of equal importance, reading becomes a self-chosen activity for them. The additional exposure and practice that they get further develops their reading abilities. I speculated that reading develops syntactic knowledge, facilitates vocabulary growth, and broadens the general knowledge base. This facilitates the reading of more difficult and interesting texts. Thus, the increased reading experiences of these children have important positive feedback effects that are denied the slowly progressing reader….*[Editor's comment: The Matthew effect is very pertinent to Bonnie Macmillan's observations in her article on p.23 where she describes how boys' brains work differently from girls and the type of reading instruction they receive is significant in the early stages of learning to read. How many boys are turned off by wrong reading instruction in the early years?]*

Research I have done that not everyone likes

One of the first research problems in reading that I investigated was the role of context in word recognition. At the time I began these investigations with my colleague Richard West (in the early 1970s), several popular theories posited that the ability to use contextual information to predict upcoming words was an important factor in explaining individual differences in reading ability. Fluent readers were said to have attained their skill because of heavy reliance on context in identifying words. Reading difficulties were thought to arise because some readers could not, or would not, use context to predict upcoming words.

To our surprise at the time (West and I had started these investigations thinking that the context view was correct), our initial investigations of this problem revealed the opposite: It was the less-skilled readers who were more dependent upon context for word recognition (Stanovich, West, & Freeman, 1981; West & Stanovich, 1978). The reason for this finding eventually became apparent: The word recognition processes of the skilled reader were so rapid and automatic that they did not need to rely on contextual information.

Over 10 years later [*now over 19 years – Editor*], this finding is one of the most consistent and well replicated in all of reading research. It has been found with all types of readers, in all types of texts, and in a variety of different paradigms (e.g., Bruck, 1988; Leu, DeGroff, & Simons, 1986; Nicholson, 1991; Nicholson, Lillas, & Rzoka, 1988). Reviews of the dozens of different studies that converge on this

conclusion are contained in Perfetti (1985), Rayner and Pollatsek (1989), and Stanovich (1980, 1984, 1986, 1991).

Perhaps understandably, at the time our initial findings were published they were not warmly received by researchers invested in the context-use theory that the results falsified. Today, however, the implications of these results have been incorporated into all major scientific models of reading process (e.g., Just and Carpenter, 1987; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989). Scientifically, the results are now uncontroversial. However, they are still not welcomed by some reading educators who would perpetuate the mistaken view that an emphasis on contextual prediction is the way to good reading.

*[Editor's emphasis and comment: The National Literacy Strategy still promotes guessing/predicting from context as a main reading strategy. See NLS Early Literacy Support manual p.23; "Shared reading: *work out an unfamiliar word based on the pictures and context of the sentence; *re-read sentence with suggested word: Does it sound right in this sentence? *cross-check suggested word by looking at initial letter: Does the word that you suggested start with this letter?" What a rigmarole! This bears no resemblance to a synthetic phonics approach for either beginning readers or for early intervention.]*

Stanovich continued…

It should be noted here that the findings I have referred to concern the use of context as an aid to word recognition rather than as a mechanism in the comprehension process. Although good readers employ contextual information more fluently in the comprehension process, they are not more reliant on contextual information for word recognition. A tendency to conflate two levels of processing in discussions of context effects has caused enormous confusion among both researchers and practitioners.

Additional confusion has been caused by the use of imprecise labels such as "word calling". Despite the frequency with which this term occurs in reading publications, it is rare to find authors who spell out exactly what they mean by the term "word caller". However, the implicit assumptions behind its use appear to be as follows: (a) Word calling occurs when the words in the text are efficiently decoded into their spoken forms without comprehension of the passage taking place. (b) This is a bad thing, because (c) it means that the child does not understand the true purpose of reading, which is extracting meaning from the text. (d) Children engaging in word calling do so because they have learned inappropriate reading strategies. (e) The strategic difficulty is one of overreliance on phonemic strategies.

The idea of word calling embodying the assumptions outlined above has gained popularity despite the lack of evidence that it applies to an appreciable number of poor readers. There is no research evidence indicating that decoding a known word into a phonological form often takes place without meaning extraction. To the contrary, a substantial body of evidence indicates that even for young children, word recognition automatically leads to meaning activation (Ehri, 1977; Stanovich, 1986) *when the meaning of the word is adequately established in memory.*

The latter requirement is crucial. Reports of word calling rarely indicate whether the words that are called are even in the child's listening vocabulary. If the child would not understand the meaning of the word or passage when spoken, then overuse of decoding strategies can hardly be blamed if the child does not understand the written words. In short, a minimal requirement for establishing word calling is the demonstration that the written material being pronounced is within the listening comprehension abilities of the child.

Secondly, it is necessary to show that the word calling is not a simple consequence of poor decoding. Although reasonably efficient decoding would appear to be the integral part of any meaningful

definition of word calling, decoding skills are rarely assessed carefully before a child is labelled a word caller. It is quite possible for accurate decoding to be so slow and capacity-demanding that it strains available cognitive resources and causes comprehension breakdowns. Such accurate but capacity-demanding decoding with little comprehension should not be considered word calling as defined above. To the contrary, it is a qualitatively different type of phenomenon. Comprehension fails not because of overreliance on decoding, but because decoding skill is not developed enough.

[Editor's comment: QCA notes that level 2C and below readers are not sufficiently skilled at blending words for decoding. Rehearsing the skill of blending in abundance in the early years is the key to successful reading. Government advice does not stress this enough and advises too many anti-research strategies such as learning an initial sight vocabulary as whole words and reliance on guessing from pictures, context and initial letters.]

Further extracts from Romance and Reality…

The connecting thread: Science

Although I have dichotomised my research projects in this essay, I really do not think of them this way. The projects, to me, are all similar in a mundane way: They are interesting problems about the reading process that were amenable to scientific test. And the latter point is really the common thread. I believe in letting scientific evidence answer questions about the nature of the reading process. Nothing has retarded the cumulative growth of knowledge in the psychology of reading more than failure to deal with problems in a scientific manner. *[Editor's emphasis]*

Education has suffered because its dominant model for adjudicating disputes is political (with corresponding factions and interest groups) rather than scientific. Education's well-known susceptibility to the "authority syndrome" stems from its tacit endorsement of a personalistic view of knowledge acquisition: the belief that knowledge resides within particular individuals who then dispenses it to others. Knowledge in science is publicly verifiable (see Stanovich, 1992) and thus depersonalized in the sense that it is not the unique possession of particular individuals or groups (Popper, 1972).

An adherence to a subjective, personalized view of knowledge is what continually leads to educational fads that could easily by avoided by grounding teachers and other practitioners in the importance of scientific thinking for solving educational problems. This training should include an explicit discussion of some of the misconceptions that people hold about science, for example, that the idea of objective depersonalised knowledge in the social sciences dehumanises people. Such facile slogans compromise both research and practice in many educational domains.

What science actually accomplishes with its conception of publicly verifiable knowledge is the democratisation of knowledge, and outcome that frees practitioners and researchers from slavish dependence on authority; and it is subjective personalized views of knowledge that degrade human intellect by creating conditions in which it is inevitably subjugated to an elite whose "personal" knowledge is not accessible to all (Bronowski, 1956, 1977; Medawar, 1982, 1984, 1990; Popper, 1971).

The scientific criteria for evaluating knowledge claims are not complicated and could easily be included in teacher-training programs, but they usually are not (thus a major opportunity to free teachers from reliance on authority is lost right at the beginning). These criteria included the publication of findings in refereed journals (scientific publications that employ a process of peer review), the duplication of the results by other investigators, and a consensus within a particular research community on whether or not

there is a critical mass of studies that point towards a particular conclusion. These mechanisms are some of the best consumer protections that we can give teachers.

Teachers should also be introduced to the values of science. Although the technological products of science are value free in that they can be used for good or ill, it is not true that the process of science is value free (Bronowski, 1956, 1977). For example, objectivity is a value that is fundamental to science and simply means that we let nature speak for itself without imposing our wishes on it. The fact that this goal is unattainable for any single human being should not dissuade us from holding objectivity as a value (this would be confusing what is the case and what ought to be). The sorry state of fields that have abandoned objectivity is perhaps the strongest argument for holding to it as a value.

[Editor's emphasis]

How Psychological Science Informs the Teaching of Reading

By Keith Rayner, Barbara R. Foorman, Charles A. Perfetti,
David Pesetsky, and Mark S. Seidenberg

Psychological Science in the Public Interest, Vol. 2, No. 2, November 2001

The greatest continuing problem of the public *[state – Ed.]* schools is their failure to teach many children how to read.

Most of the academic and behavioural problems had by children in the course of their school careers stem from poor reading. Children who start as poor readers tend to fall further behind their peers every year, not grow out of it.

Background

Poor reading skills stem in large part from faulty teaching practices. In particular, teachers fail to systematically teach new readers how to "sound out" words, i.e., they fail to teach phonics. Without decoding skills, many children stumble, guess, acquire bad reading habits, and get discouraged.

Following World War II, the "whole-word" teaching method was popular. Also called the "look-say" approach, it taught reading by using repetitious materials that emphasized 50-100 words, e.g. "Run, Spot, run" from the famous Dick and Jane series. Phonics was an add-on, not an essential.

In more recent years, a teaching method that minimizes both decoding and repetition became popular. Called "whole-language" (or "literature-based instruction" or "guided reading"), it stressed student interest and enjoyment. It used so-called "embedded phonics" and worked even less well than the "whole-word" approach.

How could schools not notice that their methods weren't working?

Fortunately, many children come to school with literacy skills acquired at home. With them, any teaching method seems to work. Children who lack such advantages do less well but their failure is easily blamed on their parents and backgrounds. So instead of recognizing the problem, schools argued that their methods worked for many students and for those who failed, better pre-school enrichment was needed.

A larger impediment was at work too: defective teacher training. Virtually every teacher and administrator trained in a school of education has been taught to idealize naturalistic forms of teaching and to frown on their opposite regardless of learning outcomes. Reading instruction that teaches discrete skills in an orderly sequence - i.e. uses phonics - was, therefore, considered substandard despite its superior results.

Whole language, therefore, was very attractive to educators despite its ineffectiveness with children who need the most help in learning to read. It was naturalistic and unstructured, and reading experts in the schools of education assured that it was a "best practice." That it was ineffective with disadvantaged students was said to be the result of insufficient time and attention to reading, not ineffective teaching.

Whole-word and whole-language reading methods have dominated the schools of education because education professors have historically considered it more important for students to be exposed to preferred forms of teaching than it is for them to gain specific knowledge and skills. In their view, reading instruction using explicit, systematic phonics may be effective but it is "unnatural" and therefore entails the risk of detrimental side effects. That the use of ineffective reading instruction exposes the child to the risk of a far greater handicap than any side effects imagined by phonics opponents is largely ignored.

The Call for Proven Methods

In the mid-eighties, California's Department of Education mandated whole-language reading instruction statewide. By the mid-nineties, reading scores had fallen to the point that they became a public scandal and a major political issue. In 1995, the California State Assembly relied on outside experts to develop and pass a bill mandating the use of phonics-based reading instruction.

In 1993, Massachusetts enacted legislation that resulted in state curriculum becoming infused with whole-language. Eventually the new curricula came to the attention of linguistics researchers at leading academic institutions in the state, whereupon a protest signed by 40 leading scholars was sent to state educational authorities and the guidelines rewritten.

In 1997, a National Reading Panel (NRP) was authorized by Congress and convened by the U. S. Department of Education to examine the research on reading instruction and make recommendations. The NRP's report was published in 2000 followed by the American Psychological Society report on which this Briefing is based.

Both reports are authoritative and both conclude that phonics-based reading instruction is indispensable. The interesting and engaging reading activities called for by whole-language reading methods are a useful adjunct but not a substitute for reading instruction that systematically and explicitly teaches decoding skills.

The deficient reading outcomes of public schooling are essentially a product of ineffective teaching stemming from defective teacher training. Reform will require significant retraining at all levels of the schooling establishment beginning with the schools of education.

Editor's comment: What is the state of play in both the US and the UK teacher training establishments? Is synthetic phonics teaching commonly understood to be the most effective and inclusive reading instruction and are there trainers in the universities who know what this approach really entails? In the UK the trainers are under duress to promote the National Literacy Strategy but we know that the NLS includes flawed advice. Does anyone have a clear picture of what our student teachers generally are being taught throughout the country? *(continued)*

The RRF hears frequently from student teachers who are not, apparently, getting trained in evidence-based reading instruction. The pattern we hear about is that the training tends to be a mix of methods with a bit of NLS thrown in. Most students say that they are very confused by the advice because their 'wider' reading (as opposed to their 'recommended' reading) leads them to understand that synthetic phonics is more effective.

Trainees 'not taught to teach reading', (Daily Telegraph, Nov 2002)

by John Clare

'Students training to be primary school teachers at Cambridge University still did not know how to teach reading at the end of a four-year degree course, Ofsted said yesterday.

It found that the teaching of reading - and, in particular, the method known as phonics - at what claims to be "a centre of excellence in a world-class university" left much to be desired.

The day after reporting that 200,000 seven-year-olds could not read properly because of the way they were taught, Ofsted criticised Cambridge for giving reading "too little attention".

It said the underlying principle of the four-year course taken by 150 trainees was "the progression of language in relation to texts, to the development of the child as a reader, writer, speaker and listener, to teaching and classroom practice".

However, the teaching of phonics - which requires children to learn how the sounds of words are written - was considered only briefly at the start of the course and not re-visited before trainees began their teaching practice towards the end.

"This contributed to a minority of fourth-year trainees lacking confidence in teaching early literacy skills and addressing reading difficulties with older pupils," the report said.

"The trainees' theoretical knowledge of the national literacy strategy is good but their pedagogical knowledge of how to teach word-level work and all the components of a literacy hour is less secure."

Cambridge has been training teachers for 150 years.'

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READING PUZZLES EXPLAINED: Old Research Supplies Missing Pieces

by Charles Richardson

Every few months we see new studies on reading or educational research with some new thoughts, but still recurring data that can't be explained beyond the "gee-whiz!" level. Public and professionals alike feel frustrated by their inability to "connect ALL the dots," and at the wiggle-room left for continuance of the so-called "reading wars." Two such puzzling pieces are the National Reading Panel (NRP) report (December 2000), and the voucher-effect findings of Howell, Wolf, Peterson, and Campbell, released in September, 2000, restated in EDUCATION WEEK, 2/7/01, "In Defense of Our Voucher Research," re-

visited in The WASHINGTON TIMES WEEKLY, 5/13/02, as "Voucher programs raised scores of inner-city blacks." The NRP cannot explain certain time-sensitive patterns of systematic phonics instructional benefits, and Howell et al cannot explain why African-American children so uniquely benefit from public-to-private school transfers. Some of the information which follows appears on www.literacy-engineering.com in "Black Under-Achievement - The Reading Connection."

The NRP Subgroup Report section on phonics (pages 2-133 thru 138) discusses at some length - experts observe but are unable to explain – repeated observations that systematic synthetic phonics taught in kindergarten and first grade has a significantly better effect than phonics teaching delayed until 2nd grade or later. Page 2-138 asks if such children "have difficulty acquiring....decoding strategies because they have already learned other ways to 'process print' that undermine the incorporation of new processes in their reading... ..Additional research is needed to study how phonics instruction is received by children who are 'already reading'; whether there are sources of conflict." There are, indeed, sources of conflict, known in the reading profession since circa 1910, which new research is able to quantify and relate to both the NRP quandary and the voucher research of Howell, et al.

The Old Research

Research by Oskar Messmer (Germany, 1903), described by E.B, Huey in The PSYCHOLOGY and PEDAGOGY of READING, (U.S.,1908), replicated by Myrtle Sholty (Chicago, 1912) and by Geraldine Rodgers (1978) in four languages, showed that there are two different types of readers (as well as various mixtures of those types, according to Rodgers). The types appear to result from whether a child is FIRST taught to process print by memorizing whole words or by decoding syllables via their letter-sound connections. Whatever is learned FIRST appears to form a habit, or reflex, that interferes with use of the other, much as learning to drive on the right-hand side of the road interferes with attempts to drive on the left.

A child taught to read by sight-memorizing tends to look at the length and outer shape of the word and seeks to connect it with a memorized word or a meaning. By contrast, a child coached to sound out a word by syllables looks at the INNER structure of a word for pronounceable syllables. As an example of conflicting perceptions of the same object, imagine a picture of a vase with the stem composed of silhouetted human faces. The two image sets compete for your attention, and whether you "see" faces or a vase may depend on your expectations.

The child who reads by syllables was termed an "objective" reader, as he can practice his decoding skills to become automatic at recovering the sounds of syllables/words, freeing his attention to focus on comprehension. By contrast, the child who reads by whole-word memorization was called a "subjective" reader, as he must continually divide his attention between comprehension of the passage and verifying each guess at an unfamiliar word by "subjecting" it to the sense of subsequent context. When his memory banks get over-loaded he makes errors on "look-alikes," e.g., "from" for "form," "trail" for "trial," "clam" for "calm," "casual" for "causal," etc.

Eye-movement studies (Adams and Bruck, 1995) have shown that inefficient [subjective] readers make frequent regressions to correct their wrong guesses, whereas efficient [objective] readers move steadily forward with a micro-stop on each word.

New Research That Re-visits the Old

The Miller Word Identification Assessment (MWIA) is a new tool that measures the degree to which a person is a subjective or objective reader. It consists of two lists of words, one drawn from the 220 high-frequency words that children are given as a "basic sight vocabulary" (letter-sound keys not explained) in early basal readers, and books such as "THE CAT IN THE HAT" and "GREEN EGGS and HAM." These 220 high-frequency words were identified by research in the 1920s as comprising half of all English running text. Dr. Seuss has stated that "THE CAT IN THE HAT" was written under contract to an educational publisher who supplied the 220 words. (Blumenfeld Education Letter, August, 1993)

The second list consists of one-syllable, phonetically-regular words (first grade stuff!), with no silent letters, nor unusual or irregular pronunciations. Comparing speed and errors on the two lists reveals the person's "reflex," or how his brain has been conditioned to process print. A phonetic (objective) reader handles both lists equally, sometimes the second list faster because its words are inherently easier. A subjective (whole-word) reader, however, may fly through the first list with few (or no) errors, but slows down and makes more errors on the second list. And the differences can be major: Slow-downs of 10 to over 50 percent, and error counts 10 times as high!

An additional testing step is to re-visit some of the mis-called phonetic words, ask the student to spell them aloud, then retry. Most of the time he will then say them correctly (!). It need be asked, "If he has the alphabetic skills to say them right, why did he mis-call them the first time when he was 'running on automatic?'" Why the difference in fluency? There is no biological rationale, as the sight-word list contains over two dozen that are either multi-syllable (another, anything) or irregular (could, would). The fluency difference has to be from a LEARNED behaviour -- the "reflex" from initial whole-word learning, a reflex that undermines/disrupts a person's automatic utilization of phonics decoding skills taught AFTER a basic sight vocabulary has been acquired. (The errors are usually "look-alikes.") The phenomenon of damage from non-phonic teaching has been observed frequently enough to be included in a 1993 National Institutes of Health pamphlet on dyslexia, and described by Dr. Samuel Orton in his article, "The Whole-Word Method As A Cause of Reading Disability" in the JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY of February, 1929. The MWIA work may be the first time this effect has been systematically quantified.

Filling in the Puzzle Pieces

The above explains the National Reading Panel's finding that systematic phonics delayed until 2nd grade or later is significantly less effective than when taught in K-1: That whole -word reflex gets in the way - has done its damage. But what of Howell's voucher findings? They are explainable by a combination of factors relating to reading, discovered via work with the MWIA. An unexpected -- but consistent -- finding is that the slow-downs and error rates for African-Americans with "whole-word dyslexia" (for lack of a better term), in similar school environments, are roughly twice as severe as those for Caucasians. The phenomenon was discovered in North Carolina by Edward Miller, creator of the MWIA, and persists in the test results by this writer on Long Island.

Miller has tested nearly 1000 students in North Carolina and Florida. My data cover nearly 200 persons including adults in drug rehabilitation programs and teenagers in a literacy program for youth involved with the criminal-justice system. Because of low frustration thresholds in this population, I elected to use MWIA's shorter version (Called "Level I") with only 50 words per list. Despite its disarming simplicity (See Appendix I), it produces startling results, comparable to those of the full-length (Level

II) version. The statistics are in preparation for wider publication, but a partial listing shows the following:

DATA:	ETHNICITY: Caucasian	African-American
Number of testees	64	65
Holistic Speed, WPM, Mean	68	63
" " Std.Dev.	29	29
Holistic Errors, Mean	4.5	7.5
" " Std.Dev.	5.0	9.5
Phonetic Speed, Mean	55	43
" " Std.Dev.	29	31
Phonetic Errors, Mean	9.1	17.1 <--
" " Std.Dev.	8.4	14.7
Percent Slo-Down, Mean	19.3	39 <--
" " Std.Dev.	16.2	28
Ratio Phon Er/Hol Er, Mean	2.6	3.4
" " Std.Dev.	2.1	2.9
Passage Comprehension, Woodcock		
Rdg. Mastery Test, Mean	5.0	3.6 Grade Equivalent
" " " Std.Dev.	2.5	1.6

(Obviously some distributions are quite skewed).

The African-American Plight

Before jumping on me as a racist, compare the above data from products of schools which "mix whole language and phonics" with the experiences of inner-city schools that use, or have switched to, phonics-only reading programs. One such is Barclay Elementary in Baltimore, praised by Albert Shanker in his NY Times column of August 20, 1995. Barclay adopted the curriculum of the Calvert (independent) School and in four years its reading scores went UP 30 to 50 percentile points and referrals for special education went DOWN by a factor of four! Also look at the inner city all-minority schools described on www.noexcuses.org which make a point of starting systematic phonics in K-1, and have black students in the 70th percentiles right up there with the Beverly Hills crowd. There are five "no-excuses" schools in the NYC area (one of which I have visited), but they are ignored by the education establishment and the media.

Consider also the testimony of Mary Burkhardt in the foreword to WHY JOHNNY S-T-I-L-L CAN'T READ (Flesch, 1981), when she was Director of K-12 Reading for the Rochester (NY) City Schools, page xiv: "I am sure you have often heard it said that the percentage of children who are minority influences the degree of reading failure in a given school or district. Reality is that whether children are 'advantaged' or 'disadvantaged,' black or white, rich or poor, does not have anything to do with how successfully children learn to read. Based on my professional experience, such statements are only excuses for not teaching children to read." Her "professional experience" included five years after she had manoeuvred three good phonics programs into place, and Rochester's first graders were above grade level and its 2nd through 6th graders averaged on grade level or better.

The Voucher Data of Howell, et al

The MWIA data has only highlighted what anyone might have deduced from careful examination of schools where African-American children do well as compared with those where they do less well:

Early phonics appears to be more crucial for African-Americans than for other ethnicities, and once that is in place they do just fine. *[Implications for UK African-Caribbeans? – Editor]*

And private schools tend to have stronger phonics programs than do public schools. A friend who taught first grade in Jersey City many years ago, when the reading programs were all phonics, used to say, "The black kids are smarter than the whites!"

In discussions of the MWIA data with black colleagues, it has been pointed out to me that Africans were the most sophisticated people in communicating by drums, and their musical talent is legendary. It may be that their super sensitivity to sound gets in the way of learning to read when they are constrained to a process based solely on visual processing, shutting out sound involvement. Only more research can solve this part of the puzzle. But, fortunately, there are remedies.

Remedies

Prevention, of course, is the best remedy. Next best, after the fact, is some way to get those ubiquitous 220 sight words temporarily out of the reading environment. Ed Miller reasoned that where the 220 high frequency words make up half of what students normally read, such repeated exposure keeps reinforcing the wrong behaviour. He devised his "Sight-Word Eliminator" (SWE) by modifying a popular American novel, blacking out those high frequency 220 wherever they occurred. One's likely first reaction on seeing it is, "How do I read this? Half the words are obliterated!"

After a word-guessing student is tutored with a full set of decoding skills, he spends a few hours with the SWE where he has to decode every word - simple behaviour modification. Miller states that a group of 56 fourth-grade students was substantially cured in a few weeks of regular practice. Students may start reading 50 words per minute with 25% errors and reach say, 100 words per minute with less than 5% errors with guided help/monitoring by a teacher or even in peer groups.

Interestingly, what's left in our language without those 220 (nuts and bolts) words is the "meat" of the story. It's surprising how well you can still follow the story line of the SWE book, Pat Robertson's AMERICA'S DATES WITH DESTINY. Thinking globally, if children risk developing "whole-word dyslexia" by unguided time spent with THE CAT IN THE HAT, should we start a campaign for warning labels to be applied by the publisher(s)? How important is it? In 1993 I tested (with the Level II) the major fraction of the seniors in an upper-middle-class Long Island high school, and compared the error counts to their verbal SAT scores. The correlation coefficient was a -0.61!
Numerically that's a robust correlation; the minus sign means that higher error counts related to lower SAT scores. From the district's (retired) reading coordinator, I learned that ten years earlier their reading program had been a whole-language series.

APPENDIX I, the Level I MWIA

HOLISTIC (The vocabulary of GREEN EGGS & HAM): Sam am and anywhere a are box be boat could car do dark eggs eat fox green goat good ham here house I in if like let mouse me may not on or rain say see so that them there they tree train the try thank would will with you.

PHONETIC (Words from WHY JOHNNY CAN'T READ): Ben nip map tag job let sip mix pad lock wig pass hot rack jet kid pack Tom luck neck pick cut deck kick duck fuzz mud hack sick men hunt rash pest land tank rush mash rest tent food bulk dust desk wax ask gulps ponds hump lamp belt.

Ruth Miskin's Nonsense Word Test

m	a	s	d	t	i
n	p	g	o	c	k
u	b	f	e	h	sh
l	r	j	v	y	w
th	z	ch	ng	qu	x

2

feg	jes	vok
gop	ruch	dez
thob	cag	shug
wiss	miff	sleck

3

sprell	creld	splind	fland
blim	flut	smez	shrid
sprund	shrong	brost	flamp

4

spow	clirt	throrn	scight
droy	scray	troud	drair
weeg	grort	ploon	frarp

5

cleab	scrule	gurt	hoint
splafe	scry	chie	floke
grooring	shrawed	scurnly	slared

6

phantrite	strowble	frubehabe	doilible
snoiggal	wacespink	disclorping	thription
illarptacture	naightentance	stobosaurous	feanlissable

Letters should be read as sounds, not names. **(Note: When the test is used as an rml entry assessment, allow 4 seconds a word. Stop when 2/3 errors are made in one box.)** Complete test as far as is possible to ascertain breadth of phonic knowledge and blending ability. Tester has separate copy to record reader's response for detailed assessment. This test should be given in conjunction with a real word and comprehension test to ascertain reader's full skills in and out of context.

Research Digest

by Jennifer Chew

Bowman, M. and Treiman, R, 2002. Relating print and speech: The effects of letter names and word position on reading and spelling performance. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 82 (2002) 305-340. This article reflects a type of thinking very alien, though in an unusual way, to synthetic phonics. The researchers' baseline is that 'US prereaders are reasonably familiar with the names of letters'. They conducted experiments in which young children were taught, by a whole-word approach, to 'read' 2-letter invented spellings. Some of the spellings allowed children to use letter-name knowledge in word-initial position (e.g. 'TM' for 'team', where the letter-name of 't' can be heard at the beginning of the word) or word-final position (e.g. 'BR' for 'bar'); some allowed them to use letter-sound knowledge (e.g. they were taught that 'TM' spelt 'tame'); and some allowed neither but were 'visually distinctive' (e.g. the 'T' and 'M' were in different sizes, colours and materials but children were told that 'TM' spelt 'wide'). It was found that children learnt the words with 'letter-name cues' in initial position most easily. The researchers suggest that including such words in early reading instruction 'may help children understand that the printed forms of words are related to their spoken forms'. By contrast, synthetic phonics advocates would surely say that even if children arrive at school already knowing letter-names, teachers are misleading them if they encourage them to believe that using letter-names as outlined above is really useful for reading.

Tunmer, W.E. and Chapman, J.W., 2002. The relation of beginning readers' reported word identification strategies to reading achievement, reading-related skills, and academic self-perceptions. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15 (2002) 341-358. This research was carried out in New Zealand, where reading instruction has been strongly influenced by the view of Clay that 'all readers, from five-year-old beginners on their first book to effective adult readers' need to use knowledge of meaning, sentence-structure etc. 'before they resort to left to right sounding out of chunks or letter clusters, or, in the last resort, single letters' (p. 9 of *An observation survey of early literacy achievement* published 1998 by Heinemann). All the children in the Tunmer and Chapman study had been taught by this type of whole language approach. The researchers nevertheless thought it possible that some children might have worked out something about the alphabetic code for themselves. This was confirmed when the children were asked what they did when they encountered a word that they didn't know: some gave replies such as 'sound it out' and 'hear all the letters', whereas others gave replies such as 'guess' and 'have a look at the picture'. Assessments were carried out at the end of Year 1 and in the middle of Year 3. These included the Burt single-word reading test and standardised comprehension tests. The children who used letter-based strategies not only achieved significantly higher scores but also had 'more positive academic self-concepts'.

Cardoso-Martins, C., 2001. The reading abilities of beginning readers of Brazilian Portuguese: Implications for a theory of reading acquisition. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, Vol. 5 No. 4 (2001) 289-317. Cardoso-Martins was interested in the 1990 suggestion of Wimmer and Hummer that the regularity of a writing-system may be the main factor encouraging beginners to use phonics as a reading strategy from the start and that this may be why English beginners do not use this strategy. She felt that *teaching* methods might be an equally important factor. She compared a Brazilian school using a phonics approach from the start with one using a whole-word approach at first and introducing phonics in the middle of the first year. Portuguese has a much more regular writing-system than English, and if this had been the main factor affecting children's strategies, then all the children, regardless of teaching method, should have relied more on phonics than on anything else. The results showed, however, that *teaching* method was a more important factor: the children initially taught by a whole-word approach did not start using phonics strategies until taught to do so.

Thoughts related to the Ofsted report (HMI 555)
The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years 1998 – 2002

by Debbie Hepplewhite

Almost uniquely, leading figures in Ofsted have always corresponded with the Reading Reform Foundation with the utmost speed, courtesy and integrity. They have engaged in the phonics debate conscientiously and have played a crucial role in moving the debate along. This latest report plays no small part in highlighting the need for a critical review of the National Literacy Strategy.

The report itself, however, operates on two levels. The message received is dependent upon the reader's prior knowledge of the literacy debate and an understanding of the true state of play of national literacy and special needs.

The report alludes to underlying flaws in the NLS framework, but should it have referred explicitly to the NLS programmes' notable absence of evidence, the national confusion regarding the *searchlights* reading model which some see as a model for adult readers, but others (including NLS trainers) use as a model for promoting guessing through picture and context cues, and the anti-research 'top down/whole language' nature of the Early Literacy Support intervention programme (see Bonnie Macmillan's report, p.11, RRF Newsletter no. 49)? What prevents Ofsted from detailing the different approaches in our schools to teaching reading and the subsequent results? Do we need clarification of the current range of practices in primary schools and the results of those different practices at least amongst the 300 sample schools? We do not have the luxury of Ofsted's national overview and people can only become fully informed if someone does the informing fully.

I have always found it puzzling that Ofsted reporting goes to the lengths of describing the details of individual lessons to provide examples of good and poor teaching practice on the one hand, whilst failing to describe the details of the specific teaching approach of outstandingly effective schools on the other. From which type of detailed information would the reader most profit?

By coincidence one such effective school, St. Michael's Primary School at Stoke Gifford, is one of Ofsted's 300 sample schools for this report. It is also one of the synthetic phonics exemplar schools (see p.5 of RRF newsletter no. 46, *A Five Year Journey with Synthetic Phonics* by Dr. Marlynne Grant). Is it acceptable, or is it remiss or unethical, that such a school has been included in the general description of an 'NLS' school for the purposes of this Ofsted survey and apparently does not warrant the distinction of being described as a 'synthetic phonics' school when it employs distinctively different reading instruction techniques from the National Literacy Strategy? One cannot help but wonder whether Ofsted is as independent a body as we would like it to be or whether it is handicapped by the precedent it has set for its particular style of reporting. There may well be no differences in results between a strictly NLS school with a similar intake to a strictly synthetic phonics school but this is not what the reading research and the classroom practice of at least some schools is indicating. Should Ofsted be helping us to get a much clearer picture of the reality? Indeed, questions need to be asked as to why the DfES and the LEAs fail to inform teachers and headteachers of the precise programmes and practices of the most successful schools with disadvantaged intakes so that others may gain from such invaluable information. National statistics of results from end of key stage testing without further information do not help schools to know how to make improvements. Graphs may put schools in a pecking order but this amounts to data in a vacuum.

It appears to be normal practice to sweep all schools under the NLS umbrella whether this is the truth or not. Is this helpful? I, for one, cannot understand this reluctance to identify different practice and do not find this acceptable. How many other schools of the 300 also employed different practices from NLS

advice - or was St. Michael's the only one? How are we to know? Why does Ofsted avoid the use of terms such as 'synthetic phonics', which it describes as "jargon", when this debate about how best to teach beginning reading is fundamental to educational success or failure and is arguably the single most important debate in English-speaking countries today? A transparent form of reporting is essential. The progress of the debate relies on people being informed about the different approaches and it is necessary to ascribe titles to the different approaches. Should this responsibility really be left to volunteer groups like the Reading Reform Foundation and to the journalists?

Should Ofsted have reported upon 'national literacy' rather than the National Literacy Strategy? Should Ofsted have felt free to describe and compare the success of the variety of approaches within the country noting, for example, the relative success of NLS schools, THRASS schools, Solity's Early Reading Research schools, Phono-Graphix schools and Jolly Phonics schools? Alternately, should Ofsted use the technical criteria of 'whole language schools', 'eclectic schools', 'synthetic phonics schools' and so on? Isn't this an essential analysis, albeit academic to some, to ascertain if there is currently a pattern of greater success of any particular approach to reading instruction, including reduced numbers of children indentified with literacy-related special needs and whether this is commensurate with the conclusions of reading research? With the high percentage of illiteracy and underachievement in this country, surely this kind of scrutiny and detail should be neither neglected nor circumvented. In any event, there is so much literature on reading research and the debate is so important that I cannot understand why Ofsted is not leading the way to bring this level of information to the teaching profession.

Has Ofsted itself undertaken an *"open, critical approach to the strategy at national level"* as it urges the teachers? Not fully. It is not entirely satisfactory to put the onus on the teachers as the vast majority of teachers are mistrained, uninformed and lack the national overview of the effects of different practices. Therefore, I argue the responsibility for more open criticism lies with Ofsted itself acting on behalf of the teachers, the children and the general public. I urge the reader (yet again) to read carefully "between the lines" of this report as Ofsted fails to be sufficiently explicit and transparent in the detail of what transpires in our primary schools to inform ordinary teachers, headteachers and parents how best to move forwards with the teaching of reading. The implication is that all schools are NLS schools, that the NLS needs tweaking and that all teachers need to do is throw in some extra phonics in years 3 and 4 and teach a bit better. There is much more to it than this. I suggest that an *'open and critical approach to the strategy at national level'* should include questions as to why NLS programmes are not scientifically tested prior to the national roll-out and who is responsible for this, why the advice of various phonics experts has not been heeded from at least the outset of the National Literacy Strategy four years ago when Ofsted, HMI and the reading research have perpetually pointed to the need for more phonics teaching, and why Ofsted continues to report in a veiled manner whilst clearly stating that teachers themselves need to start thinking critically and independently. One of the most mystifying questions of all is why Stephen Anwyll, Dr Laura Huxford, Baroness Ashton, Estelle Morris (when Ms Morris was in office) and others took no interest in a reading instruction approach which results in no gender gap and a virtual 100% success rate at key stage 1 and beyond. There is a wealth of information about how best to teach reading effectively and inclusively and it has existed for many years. Why have the managers of the National Literacy Strategy chosen to ignore it and why have they chosen to ignore Ofsted's advice to 'the managers of the NLS' in the report *Teaching of Phonics*, Oct 2001?

With ever-increasing prescription, bureaucracy and legislation, there has not been a culture of teachers thinking critically and independently for some time. When they do, it is my experience and the experience of others that this is far from welcomed. In any event, teachers feel that they have no influence and cannot reverse the flood of initiatives of one description or another whether or not they consider them to be beneficial. The state of play that we see in our schools currently is one that I call 'over-professionalism'. Teachers are so overwhelmed that they are tempted to leave permanent positions, avoid year 2 and year 6 posts (the end of key stage tests cohorts), leave teaching altogether, or

simply perform their duties as prescribed with a certain abrogation of their individual responsibility because they are doing as they have been officially instructed. They have virtually no choice but to pass the buck. What worries me enormously is the common vocabulary of teachers with regard to their planning, which they speak of as 'justifying', 'evidencing' and 'being seen to be done' rather than planning to be effective and organised teachers. Fear of Ofsted and LEA inspection is still onerous, at least when it is imminent, and many people seem to think that a school becomes more effective because of the quality of the paperwork rather than the day-to-day efforts of the teachers. What a state of affairs. We are crying out for someone with authority to bring common sense back to the business of running our schools, to bring honest evaluation to the literacy debate and to test scientifically any government initiatives before national roll-outs.

Here is an example of the dangers of omitting important detail:

Extract from p.2 of Ofsted's report:

The progress made by some of the lowest-attaining schools over the last four years makes it very clear that significant improvements are possible. It is undoubtedly harder for some schools than for others to change teaching and raise standards, but even in areas of social deprivation and staffing difficulties, just under half of the schools have made good progress.

Yes, Ofsted, but which schools made the most progress and what did they do?

Very pertinent to Ofsted's comment above is the case of Osmani School in Tower Hamlets. I have no idea whether this is in the sample of 300 but I mention this school to make a point about the current disguising of what is really going on in some of our schools and how we must know of the details to gain a greater understanding. An article in the magazine produced by the Department for Education and Skills, *Teachers,* (*Learning Lessons*, February 2002) used this school as an example for promoting the effectiveness of the national strategies:

Richard Pendleton wrote; *'One of the most dramatic stories was provided by the Osmani School in Tower Hamlets. In 1998, Ofsted described the school as 'failing', with just over one in eight pupils achieving the necessary standards at KS2. Three years later, the same set of results showed that the Osmani School was the most improved school in the country.*

"The literacy and numeracy hours have been key to the improvement," says headteacher Judith Grylls.'

There was no mention in this DfES article that Osmani School did not follow the National Literacy Strategy advice for beginning reading.

In December 2001, however, Osmani School featured in both the *Times Educational Supplement* and *The Daily Telegraph* and both articles pointed out that Osmani School did not follow the National Literacy Strategy advice for the teaching of reading. In *The Daily Telegraph* (5 December, 2001) Liz Lightfoot wrote:

'The Government's literacy and numeracy hours have helped to raise standards, [Judith Grylls] says, although the school has rejected the method of teaching reading in the strategy, substituting Jolly Phonics, a more traditional and faster way of familiarising children with the relationship between letters and sounds.'

It seems to me that the method of teaching beginning reading is a vital factor in the future literacy success of the children and one that should not be disguised. Yet time and again Ofsted fudges the issues

and the DfES and the National Literacy Strategy managers to date have completely buried their heads in the sand.

Further extracts from the Ofsted report, pages 35 and 36:

150. Despite these improvements, however, progress has been uneven. This year's English results at Key Stage 2 have fallen five percentage points short of the government's target. Last year's report referred to the need for reflection and analysis and this need still remains. *[It appears that the NLS managers chose to ignore the advice of Ofsted in the Teaching of Phonics, October 2001, report – Ed.]*

151. There are a number of weaknesses in the design and implementation of the strategy. Some of these have been inherent from the beginning:

- **The guidance from the NLS on how to teach phonics was not helpful enough in enabling teachers to teach phonic knowledge and skills systematically and speedily enough from Year R onwards. The teaching of phonics got off to a poor start and it has still not had enough impact on Years 3 and 4.** *[It is in reception and key stage 1 that greater emphasis should be placed on phonics teaching, then we would not need to plough phonics intervention strategies into years 3 and 4 – Ed.]*

- **The 'searchlights' model of reading took a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and therefore placed too much emphasis, at the earliest stages of learning to read, on the use of a broad range of decoding strategies and not enough on phonics.** *[Ofsted has expressed its concern about the 'searchlights' model misleadingly. A 'one-size-fits-all' synthetic phonics strategy is remarkably effective. Premature use of a broad range of reading strategies invariably entails the promotion of 'guessing' and learning words as wholes which are the damaging elements – Ed.]*

- **Approaches to the teaching of reading, in particular shared and guided reading, were untested in this country. Teachers took a long time to get used to guided reading and there are still aspects of both that are unsatisfactory.** *[Are any of the NLS programmes scientifically tested? – Ed.]*

152. Other weaknesses have become apparent more recently:

- **In responding to emerging weaknesses, the strategy has produced extra guidance and materials. While the materials themselves have been useful, schools have found it difficult to take an overview of all the elements and this has adversely affected the coherence of the teaching.** *[More and more intervention and booster programmes cannot make good the damage of a dearth of phonics and blending in the beginning stages of learning to read. All the additional programmes are unmanageable and the Early Literacy Support programme in particular needs immediate withdrawal as it is grossly mistraining teachers and teaching assistants – Ed.]*

- **The strategy has not succeeded in helping schools to narrow the gap between the performance of boys and girls, particularly in writing, which is now wider than it was four years ago; nor has it increased sufficiently the proportion of boys achieving level 4 in writing at the end of Key Stage 2.** *[The RRF and others have made it perfectly clear that there is no gender gap with synthetic phonics teaching. Why have the DfES, the NLS team, Baroness Ashton, Estelle Morris and others not been interested in this important fact? – Ed.]*

153. **To tackle the deepest and most intractable of these problems will require further development of the strategy, as well as better and more challenging teaching across the board. It is imperative that the next phase of the strategy deals with embedding it, not just within the primary curriculum as a whole, but also in the way teachers work. There are still teachers who follow the framework and guidance with too little questioning and reflection. Schools have reached the stage where they need to make the strategy work for them – and that includes being critical of things that are not effective enough. A great deal has been achieved, but further progress will depend on an open, critical approach to the strategy at a national level. This report describes the strategy's successes, but it also draws attention to areas for improvement.** *['Areas for improvement' is a very diplomatic way of describing flaws and malpractice! Parts of the strategy need totally changing and other parts need modifying. There are some good ideas, however, and these need identifying along with the poor ideas without the complication of politics and diplomacy – Ed.]*

Fortunately, Ofsted's report has created a great deal of media attention including television and radio broadcasts and a flurry of articles in various newspapers from leading journalists who are all well-informed about the current literacy debate. News that Professor David Hopkins, head of the standards and effectiveness unit, *"will be holding a seminar in March this year to look at recent research evidence and programmes about phonics, and how these could inform the future development of the NLS"* shortly followed.

This is excellent news, but it remains to be seen how the NLS managers can be moved away from their considerable intransigence and unaccountability to date. Even now, during the latest training delivered by the National Literacy Strategy managers to NLS consultants on 'Third Wave Intervention', a question about synthetic phonics was swept aside and the synthetic phonics research was dismissed out of hand. Furthermore, during special needs training there was not a single mention of the success of synthetic phonics programmes both for initial teaching and intervention. This is inexplicable.

And here is one last extract from p. 3 of the Ofsted report:

These results show that nearly one third of pupils still transfer to Key Stage 2 with reading skills below level 2B; in writing, four in ten pupils transfer with attainment below this level including almost half of all boys. At level 2B and above, the gap between the attainment of boys and girls in writing is 15 percentage points. This wide gap continues to be a cause for concern.

Results like these, as described in Ofsted's report, account for my often controversial comments. This high failure rate and the lack of government interest in scientific testing and synthetic phonics thus far is, in my opinion, not excusable. I cannot understand it.

We can only hope that Professor Hopkins' forthcoming phonics seminar (17 March 2003) will set everyone on the long-awaited road to sense, scientific practices and literacy which is truly 'national'. It is imperative that the DfES responds fully and professionally to the critics of the NLS reading instruction advice and does not merely pay lip-service to listening to old and new evidence whilst carrying on regardless with flawed NLS programmes and training. We shall soon see for ourselves what the future holds.

Why Hamish is ahead on reading

An explanation for the low achievement of English boys in reading may be found in Scotland

by Bonnie Macmillan

(Printed in the Times Educational Supplement on 13 June 1997)

The performance of boys in relation to girls, particularly in reading skills, is a relatively new phenomenon. The recent debate has highlighted the problem. But if it is to be solved, an explanation for boys' underachievement must be found.

Two points may help to concentrate thinking. First, why did these sex differences in reading not exist in the past? Various surveys reporting on standardised reading scores show that, formerly, where sex differences did occur at the age of seven or eight, they usually disappeared by the age of 11. Today, significant differences between girls and boys are still dramatically apparent in English tests at the ages of 14, 16 and 18.

Second, these differences do not occur in other countries, such as Germany and Austria, even at the ages of seven or eight. One might imagine this is due to the greater regularity of their language or to differences within their culture. However, there is one English-speaking country that is very similar to England, but where no sex differences in reading exists. That country is Scotland.

As late as 1992, when sex differences in England had become the norm, no sex differences in reading scores existed among Scottish eight-year-olds. Furthermore, a comparison of the results of Scottish and English children on the Edinburgh Reading Test showed that, compared to all English children, Scottish boys were reading at a level four months in advance. However, compared to English boys, their level was 10 months in advance.

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain boys' poor achievement. With these reasons in mind, one might wonder whether boys mature more slowly in England than in Scotland, or whether there are differences between the two countries in boys' brains, or the number of females involved with teaching reading at home or at school. Do Scottish teachers choose more appropriate books for boys to read, or are boys better behaved in Scotland?

Before dealing with these questions, it is important to note there is one major difference in educational policy between the two countries. While 1960s child-centred methods of instruction have radically reshaped the teaching of reading in England, in Scotland methods have remained more traditional and phonics-based. It may be that code-based methods of reading instruction are more advantageous for boys than other methods. *[It appears standards in literacy have slipped in Scotland in recent years with the increasingly analytic approach and look and say reading schemes.*
See http://news.scotsman.com/archive.cfm?id=269582003 – Editor]

Boys do mature at slower rates than girls. Australian research shows that young boys are eight months behind girls in their ability to remember some letters in a word. At the age of five, boys can remember on average one letter in a word. Yet in England, boys of this age are expected to remember words such as "crocodile" or "slippers".

In Scotland, where teaching focuses more on phonic-processing skills, boys are given the opportunity to process letters one at a time and to transfer visual information to auditory memory. Thus their low visual memory skills become relatively unimportant.

Boys and girls do appear to use different areas of the brain when reading. Areas predominantly in the left hemisphere are activated in boys, whereas areas in both hemispheres are activated in girls. Evidence suggests that England's mixed methods, where pictures, word shape and word length (largely activating right-brain processes) are encouraged as reading strategies, put boys – who have "all their eggs in one basket" so to speak – more at risk of failing to use the appropriate left-hemisphere skills.

It is indeed possible that boys in England, where guessing and memorisation of whole words is more widespread, will be much less motivated to read than boys in Scotland. Word guessing brings limited rewards when guesses are based only on the one letter of a word that boys of young age are capable of retaining in visual memory.

Another possible reason suggested for boys' lack of motivation is that teachers choose inappropriate books for them. Book choice has been changing in Scotland, and whole-word eclectic reading schemes and "real books" are becoming as popular as they are in England. However, if it is still the case that boys in Scotland receive more direct instruction in phonological coding as well as, or before, being introduced to such books, it is likely that these books will not be quite so inappropriate or difficult for them to read.

Finally, if teachers in England fail at the start to provide boys with a logical and effective strategy for reading words, the frustration and boredom that result could lead to behaviour much worse than displayed by Scottish boys. If boys do not succeed in learning to read, they may quickly discover that they can succeed in making a nuisance of themselves.

See www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/ins4-00.asp for latest Clackmannanshire results; Accelerated Reading and Spelling with Synthetic Phonics: A Five Year Follow Up

Synthetic Phonics – what is it?

by Sue Lloyd

Synthetic phonics does not start with whole printed words. It starts with single letters and the sounds the letters represent. As soon as the children have been taught a few letters and sounds, including one or two vowels, they are taught to look at words, produce a sound for each letter (no digraphs are included at this point) and then blend the sounds all-through-the-word into normal word-pronunciations. This is significantly different from most National Literacy Strategy (NLS) activities, where the emphasis is on the analysis of spoken words supplied by the teacher. This is clearly important, but for spelling rather than reading. The focus in this paper is firmly on synthesising (sounding out and blending) for reading, as this is where the NLS is weak.

Increasing numbers of regular words can be blended as the number of letter-sound correspondences taught increases, e.g. at, dog, hen, spot, bend, hill. All the time the teaching is building up in a logical sequence. Almost from the beginning the children understand that there is a code to reading, and that unknown words can be worked out. This gives the children, and particularly the boys, a great deal of confidence. The more complicated and irregular words are gradually introduced later, and in a structured sequence. Although teachers read stories to the class, the children are not expected to read books for themselves, and certainly not books that contain digraphs and irregular words that have not been taught.

The next stage is teaching the digraphs, two letters making one sound. As the digraphs are taught the children practise blending regular words that use these digraphs e.g. boat, sleep, shout, sport, boil, sister. Regular practice enables the children to become skilled at blending words with digraphs.

Once the children are used to blending, then less regular keywords are tackled, usually two or three new ones a week. Initially the children blend them as far as possible; if blending results in inaccurate pronunciation, they are told the word and then look for the irregular part. Some part of the word will be regular and by concentrating on the irregular part the children are more able to get it into their long-term memory. For example, with the word 'do' the 'd' is regular but the 'o' has an /oo/ sound.

This thorough grounding prepares the children for the more complicated task of reading books for themselves. Initially it is important that the texts should be decodable, that is they use words that the children can read by sounding out and blending. Inevitably there have to be some less regular words but these should be kept to a minimum and should consist of the ones that have already been taught in class. Once there is fluency in the reading then the children can cope with far more irregular words. It is fluency in the blending that is the key to successful reading. This then leads to improved comprehension. If you cannot read it, you cannot comprehend it. The mechanics come first.

In the Quality and Curriculum Authority (QCA) publication 'Standards at Key Stage 1 English and Mathematics 2001' it was reported that the children who achieved Level 2B or above at Key Stage 1 Standard Attainment Tasks were good at blending but the children below that were particularly poor at it. Sounding out and blending is the strategy which good readers use when they encounter an unfamiliar new word. Beginners cannot do all the things that proficient readers do, but this happens to be one thing which they *can* do if text is appropriately graded and which will stand them in good stead forever. They encounter unfamiliar printed words far more frequently than proficient readers, but they can still use the same strategy, provided that the words incorporate letter-sound correspondences that they have been taught. This is why decodable texts are very important for beginners. They provide the revision of letter-sounds and give the blending practice which is necessary if the children, particularly the bottom 20%,

are to become fluent at reading. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) reported that 20% of children were so poor at reading at KS1 that they were not able to achieve the necessary level at the end of KS2. The NLS, with its lack of concentration on blending, lets this 20% of children down. They cannot blend because the NLS has not emphasised it enough.

Synthetic phonics builds up from small to large, in a structured way, and teaches blending as the first, and virtually only, strategy for the word-identification aspect of reading. The NLS goes from large to small, uses analysis rather than blending, and encourages a mixture of strategies most of which amount to guessing. This is why synthetic phonics is far more effective than the phonics in the NLS.

The differences between the NLS phonics and Synthetic phonics.

The impression given by the NLS is that words are either to be recognised as 'sight words' or to be guessed at from initial letter, context or pictures. This impression is given by the following:

(a) the word-lists in the 'Framework' are headed 'High-frequency words to be taught as "sight recognition" words (p. 60),

(b) there is no reference, in the text below this heading, to the fact that some of the words can and should be read by sounding out and blending, and

(c) children are expected, from the start, to read books in which most of the words cannot be decoded on the basis of what they have been taught.

This is where the damage begins. The children with a good visual memory will cope well with this start, although not as well as with synthetic phonics, but for the many children who have a poor memory and find it difficult, or even impossible, to learn a few words, it is a bad start. Forty-five words to learn by sight must be a nightmare for them. Straight away the bottom group have a feeling of failure. They can't remember the words from their shapes. There seems to be an endless number of words to learn. In order to try and understand how difficult it is, we could imagine ourselves trying to memorise the shapes of Greek, Arabic or Hebrew words. Even though we know that there is an alphabetic code, and have probably a better memory for symbols than that bottom group of children, it would be difficult for us to learn these words by their shape. It is important to remember that our letters are just as odd to children as the Greek, Arabic or Hebrew ones are to us (my apologies to any literate readers of these other languages).

By contrast, synthetic phonics avoids any suggestion of sight-word learning at first, emphasises sounding-out and blending as the first and virtually only strategy to be used for the word-identification aspect of reading, and provides texts which make this feasible.

It is also worth noting that the vast majority of children arrive at school with no sight words, apart from perhaps their name. It is a myth that they can easily read words like McDonalds, Coca Cola, Bob the Builder etc. Take these words away from their settings or logos and the children cannot read them at all. They are not reading the letters, only the colours/pictures/building surrounding them.

The NLS then encourages the teaching of most of the alphabet letter sounds so that the initial letter can be used to help with reading unknown words.

With synthetic phonics this would be completely discouraged. Guessing words from the initial letter is notoriously inaccurate and starts the children in the bad habit of guessing, which is a very hard habit to break.

The NLS continues by teaching the short vowels a,e,i,o,u, but in the NLS Progression in Phonics (PIPs) programme this does not take place until Step 4, which is the last step before Year 1. Therefore, without any vowels there can be no blending before this stage. The children are expected to read books or texts from Step 1 but the blending skill is left until the latter part of Reception, and then hinted at rather than explicitly being taught. This reinforces the impression that the children are meant to read by learning words by sight and not by blending. This is why the NLS is not a synthetic phonics approach.

In Year 1 the letters v,w,x,y,z are taught and the main digraphs. The children play games with these letter-sounds (PIPs). Out of the 28 games, only three are truly blending games. The other games are very much about identifying the sounds in spoken words, which is the skill needed for writing.

Synthetic phonics teachers find that these games are very time-consuming and fail to devote the necessary time to the essential skill of blending. However, another major problem is the fact that these games are played in isolation and not related directly to the task of reading and writing texts: the incompleteness of phonics teaching when not applied to the reading and writing of texts was brought out by the National Reading Panel in the USA. In the NLS blending is always the last strategy that children are expected to use when reading texts (it is the first strategy in synthetic phonics). You only have to look at the Early Literacy Support video to realise this. You never see a teacher saying "blend it" or "sound it out". You see the teachers encouraging the use of picture cues, initial letter and guess, or just plain guessing from the context (even when the word is easy to decode). The implication in the NLS is that the children do not blend when reading texts and this, in my view, is the worst fault. The more able children, usually the ones with the good memories, understand the alphabetic code from the games and are able to apply it to reading texts and writing. These are the children who will get Level 2B or above at KS1 (If they had been taught with synthetic phonics they would achieve even higher results). The less able children are bewildered by the many strategies, they can't remember words by sight, and they become demoralised. The number of new words to learn seems endless.

If this method of teaching was applied to maths, teachers would be expected to start with sums: holding up cards with sums on them, such as 2+3=5, 2+4=6 etc., and chanting what they say. Then they would follow this by playing some games that teach the value of numerals, and, as with the NLS and Progression In Phonics, expect the children to make the connection between sums and numerals by themselves. Once again you would find some children manage to do it but the others would become totally lost. This is roughly what we are doing to the children when we ask them to learn whole words without blending skills or sufficient letter-sound knowledge, and then expecting them to understand the code of reading by playing games that are not connected to texts. The cart is still before the horse and this is why the phonics in the NLS does not work as well as systematic synthetic phonics.

Reading and writing skills in their various stages are measurable. The scientists should be involved in helping to decide what is the most effective and inclusive good practice.

Editor's comment: Following the promotion of the Reading Recovery Book Bands catalogue, particularly through the NLS Early Literacy Support programme, schools have invested in further reading books to address the apparent needs of beginning readers. On the following page are examples of full texts from the lowest level of Book Bands and these are frequently given to children who have only been introduced to some of the letter-sound correspondences. You can see that predictable repetitive texts are still the flavour of the day. The children are expected to learn the words by sight. In reality many, if not most, are unable to do this and cope by memorising the sentences and using the pictures for any new words. Cover up the pictures and the children cannot read. The RRF know this type of text is entirely unhelpful to children when in the early stages of learning to read. Children taught by synthetic phonics can read independently an extremely large number of words at an early stage and books should reflect this decoding ability whilst experience and fluency develops. In contrast the texts on p.28 have a very limited number of unjustifiably difficult words for a beginner:

1.'Two the same' (Oxford Literacy Web)
Poppy has two yellow socks.
Poppy has two green ribbons.
Poppy has two blue shoes.
Poppy has two red gloves.
Poppy has two big brothers, Mike and Spike.
They look the same, too.

2.'The giant's day out' (Spiral Starters)
He wanted a drink.
He wanted a watch.
He wanted a comb.
He wanted a book.
He wanted a hat.
He wanted a friend.

3.'Spooky Pet'
Amy wanted a bat.
Amy wanted a spider.
Amy wanted a ghost.
Amy wanted a monster.
Amy wanted a dragon.
The dragon wanted Amy!

4.'The Pancakes' (Oxford Reading Tree)
The frying pan.
The flour.
The eggs.
The milk.
The butter.
The pancakes.
The pancake race.

5.'Bath time' (Oxford Literacy Web)
Bath time, elephant.
Bath time, penguin.
Bath time, bear.
Bath time, giraffe.
Bath time, hippo.
Whoops!
Bath time, Fred! [zoo keeper knocked into water]

It is our suspicion that when the National Literacy Strategy was first drawn up, politics, diplomacy and bias played an unhealthy role in influencing the national advice for reading instruction. The 'balanced' or 'mix of methods' approach was a consequence of compromise between different factions in influential educational circles. This state of affairs is reflected in other English-speaking countries. There should be no room in education for this kind of power which is anti the common good of any nations' children.

There is such an unquestionable body of evidence, past and present, for the greater effectiveness of synthetic phonics teaching that teachers and parents ought to be properly informed and all children ought to be taught by evidence-based methods and programmes. There is no excuse for anything less.

Any further promotion of beginning reading instruction methods in our teacher training establishments and schools which are not evidenced by scientific testing will be a travesty.

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