

In denial – the NLS whitewash continues

Professor Greg Brooks claims on behalf of the DfES that the National Literacy Strategy is “... a synthetic phonics programme in Sue Lloyd’s sense” but Sue Lloyd and the RRF do not agree!

Following the DfES phonics seminar in March 2003, Brooks asks in his report “To what extent, and in what ways, does the phonics element of the National Literacy Strategy need modifying?” Brooks supports Professor David Hopkins’s summing-up at the DfES phonics seminar and states “a major redirection of the phonics element of the NLS is neither necessary nor appropriate; but a number of revisions, and some focused research, are needed.” Read Debbie Hepplewhite’s personal response to the seminar and to Brooks’s report (p.5). Hepplewhite maintains that the NLS advice and programmes for reading are not in line with the research, do not promote synthetic phonics teaching and directly lead to underachievement in literacy for a substantial number of children.

The RRF continues to call for the withdrawal of the Early Literacy Support programme and a national enquiry into the advice for the teaching of reading through NLS training and materials. View or download seminar papers from www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/new/published/phonics/

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Dear Readers,

In this edition Mona McNee describes some of her experiences (p.33) which understandably led her to found the UK Reading Reform Foundation in 1989. It is greatly significant that fourteen years later, I attended a DfES phonics seminar as the representative of the RRF only to be utterly dismayed by an event which could, and should, have marked a true turning point in the history of teacher-training for reading instruction in this country. I write my personal response to the seminar and to Professor Greg Brooks's subsequent report on p.5. Whilst the RRF is pleased to have made its mark in Brooks's reporting, it is SO disappointing that the NLS programmes and advice for reading instruction were not examined properly and compared honestly with the research on reading and other programmes. Tweaking the NLS reading instruction programmes and ignoring the flaws will not do the job needed to raise literacy standards. The reading instruction method which the DfES continues to promote needs to be radically changed to become fully consistent with the research and to raise the literacy levels of the bottom 20% and eradicate the gender gap.

Must this whitewash continue or will Charles Clarke, the Minister for Education, step in to investigate and intervene when he learns of the truth of the matter? Jennifer Chew (p.17) and Professor Diane McGuinness (p.18) respond succinctly to the National Literacy Strategy paper written specifically for the DfES phonics seminar. The NLS paper '*Teaching Phonics in the National Literacy Strategy*', Professor Brooks's report and the speakers' papers can be viewed and downloaded at: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/new/published/phonics/

There is also a direct link to the seminar material from the RRF website homepage. (The RRF website is well worth a visit with many links to research and relevant sites of interest, plus we have a new-style message board which is very 'active'.)

As always, Jennifer Chew provides us with interesting research facts in her digest (p.21) and she describes the Spalding Method in action seen first hand in a school in Arizona (p.22). We have received some touching letters with the theme of 'failed boys' (p.23) and a poignant article entitled 'The Invisible Enemy' (p.25) by Alyson Mountjoy about how we fail the children even before they get to secondary school. This is followed by an article by Dr Bonnie Macmillan 'Illiterate boys: The new international phenomenon' (p.27) which provides us with yet more evidence of failing our boys.

I am pleased to include Christopher Jolly's keynote speech in Brunei in October 2003 at the British Council Conference; 'Raising standards: The opportunities and difficulties' (p.37). I consider Chris Jolly to be quite a visionary. His insight into the reading debate, and the spread of the Jolly Phonics programme are making an important contribution to teaching English in many parts of the world. Charles Clarke should be meeting with Chris and listening to what he has to say based on his broad knowledge and experiences.

I am sorry for the delay since the last newsletter and hope that you enjoy reading this latest edition. I finish with 'the last word' on p. 43 in more ways than one, because Jennifer Chew is kindly taking over editorship of the next RRF newsletters.

Debbie Hepplewhite

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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

Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles

1. Teach letter-shapes just by their sounds at first, not their names. That eliminates half of one particular part of the learning and leaves just the half that is going to be used directly ('directly' both in the sense of 'in a direct way' and in the sense of 'almost immediately'). Introduce letter names through singing an alphabet song in the first instance, but ensure that the automatic response to letters and letter-combinations is saying the sounds that they represent.

2. Teach letters and their sounds in groups that include consonants and vowels so that the children can read words, make words and spell words:

- Teach blending all-through-the-word so that the children can *immediately* start using the few letter-sounds that they know in reading simple words - the practical application of code-knowledge makes them see the point of what they are learning and is very satisfying for them. While *teaching* blending, you cannot avoid pronouncing the whole word *after* the individual phonemes, but once the children begin to get the hang of it, avoid pronouncing the whole word whenever possible - get *them* to arrive at a pronunciation by sounding out and blending.
- Teach segmenting all-through-the-spoken-word so that the children can immediately start using letter-sounds to spell simple words aloud and by writing.

3. Tolerate invented spelling at first, provided that it is phonemically accurate - children will understand the nature of the code better if they practise using it in both directions purely as a code (i.e. without worrying about spelling conventions - e.g. that the /k/ sound is represented in 'cat' by a 'c', not a 'k'). Avoid asking the children to write independently before they have been taught at least one way of representing all the main sounds in English.

4. Teach no sight words at first so that decoding is uppermost in children's minds and children do not develop an inappropriate reading reflex. When irregular words are tackled, teach the children to blend these words as well. Naturally they will have to be told the correct pronunciation. Then when an irregular word comes up in their reading the children will blend it and be reminded of that 'tricky' word.

5. Once the basic sounds of the alphabet letters have been covered including some digraphs, start introducing alternative sounds for the letters already learnt and alternative spellings for sounds.

6. Use texts which are decodable on the basis of what the children have been taught at any given point, and make it clear that these are not just to be decoded but also to be read for meaning. Do not promote reading strategies which are merely guessing words from pictures, context or initial letter cues.

7. Practise correct spelling, handwriting and simple punctuation through regular dictation. That is, controlled letters, spelling variations, words and sentences which the children can be expected to write.

These evidence-based teaching principles mean that children are not just learning letter-sound knowledge in a pure form but are also applying it from a very early stage which helps it to become embedded.

In denial

A personal response to the DfES phonics seminar held on 17 March 2003 and Greg Brooks's subsequent paper: 'Sound sense: the phonics element of the National Literacy Strategy' (July 03).

By Debbie Hepplewhite, Feb 2004

View or download the papers from the seminar at www.standards.dfee.gov.uk/new/published/phonics/

In RRF newsletter no. 50 I wrote *'Thoughts related to the Ofsted report (HMI 555) The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years 1998 – 2002'* and described how this Ofsted report (Nov 2002) created substantial media interest and led to the convening of a phonics seminar hosted by Professor David Hopkins, head of the standards and effectiveness unit. The seminar was a much-welcomed event and viewed with great anticipation by many who are concerned about the high percentage of illiteracy in our country.

It is time to examine what changes have been made, or are likely to be made, as a result of these significant events and whether these changes are consistent with the research, and reflect the criticism, which was presented prior to and during the phonics seminar:

The seminar

I wanted to be able to report positively about the seminar. I cannot.

I was invited to attend the seminar as a representative of the Reading Reform Foundation. It was perplexing, however, why Sue Lloyd (of Jolly Phonics' fame) was not at first invited considering the huge contribution that Jolly Phonics is making to raising understanding of just what is possible with early years literacy teaching since its publication in 1992.

When eventually Lloyd was invited, her paper for the seminar was not distributed to the attendees. Subsequently, Lloyd's response to the NLS paper did not qualify for publishing on the DfES standards site as she was not invited as a 'speaker' per se.

Out of the whole day's conference, each speaker was allotted a 10 minute slot to present their research followed by a brief question and answer session. Professor Linnea Ehri (chairperson of the US National Reading Panel which conducted a meta-analysis of experiments on phonics published in April 2000) was allowed a few minutes extra in the light of being flown over from the States especially for the event. I would suggest that these time allocations amounted to an insult, considering the importance of this seminar.

Some of the speakers were visibly flustered when Professor Hopkins rang his warning bell to indicate that the finishing time loomed near. I could not believe that this was a national-level review of international research into the teaching of reading. It was dismaying and, in my opinion, grossly inadequate. None of the researchers were able to do justice to describing their findings on, collectively, thousands of children over many years in these circumstances.

Surprisingly, barely anyone asked any questions of the speakers. This afforded me the opportunity to raise with the attendees issues that the RRF has drawn attention to over and over again through its correspondence, newsletters and website. These included grave criticism that the National Literacy Strategy programmes and training have promoted the reading strategies of learning words as whole shapes through the emphasis on an initial sight vocabulary and guessing/predicting from picture, context and initial letter cues. Such strategies have led to fierce debate throughout the English-speaking world. They have been shown to create needless literacy special needs, symptoms of dyslexia, behaviour problems and actually RETARD the development of good reading and writing skills. Unfortunately, the teaching profession continues to believe widely the teaching myth of promoting 'multi-reading strategies to suit individual learning styles' in reading instruction. This is often confused with the advantage of applying multi-SENSORY teaching and learning strategies. Reading instruction methods which can work for some, but which can damage many children's reading skills, prevail and the NLS programmes champion them. This could explain why the schools cannot reach the government's targets and there is a large gender gap in literacy.

One of the comments I made (several times) was that no-one at the DfES or NLS team would address this criticism no matter what we said or did. No-one would mention or respond to information we have provided about the international debate. It is very simply, and very cleverly, avoided, sidelined or ignored. This continues to be the case. *[Greg Brooks's paper mentions research relating to the role that 'context' plays in reading (p. 21 of his report). He has addressed this matter, therefore, but fails to examine what part the National Literacy Strategy has played in promoting the 'strategy' of guessing from context, and other guessing/predicting strategies, to the detriment of developing good decoding skills in young readers. He justifies the searchlight model claiming that "it has been (mis)interpreted". It would appear that he does not know what reading strategies, for example, the Early Literacy Support programme promotes first and foremost!]*

Ruth Miskin's appearance as a speaker was a breath of fresh air as she stated: "Give little children several weeks of intensive phonics, interesting books to read with words that they are able to read and you get spectacular results. What is your problem?" She said it in a nutshell.

As the end of the seminar drew near Professor Hopkins summed up. His conclusions were inexplicable as they failed totally to reflect the research findings or to address the questions raised about the NLS programmes. He said that there was still need for a small initial sight vocabulary and that there was no need to change the NLS including the searchlights reading model. I was incredulous as were some others. The speakers were all clear about major flaws in the NLS advice and programmes.

Professor Ehri flagged up the fact that 'second graders' showed signs of damage from bad guessing habits caused by learning words as wholes and reading strategies that included guessing (which the NLS prefers to describe as 'predicting'). Professor Ehri represented the findings from a wide range of reading research as summarized by the National Reading Panel. I capitalized on Professor Ehri's mention of children with 'bad habits', asking her to elaborate and then relating her comments to the flawed reading advice in the Early Literacy Support programme which heavily promotes the learning of words as whole shapes and the prediction of words from pictures, context and initial letter cues as the main reading strategies. Phonics is last on the strategy list and then for the most part as a 'checking the word that you guessed' strategy. Why did Professor Hopkins not think that this NLS early intervention programme AT LEAST required further investigation considering Professor Ehri's comments about bad habits? Why indeed. Why were the contents of the ELS programme not up for examination considering the RRF has called for its complete withdrawal?

Shortly after the seminar I emailed both Greg Brooks and David Hopkins expressing my great surprise at the latter's summing-up. I asked whose opinion was Professor Hopkins expressing and on what evidence had he based his conclusions. Weren't we, after all, looking at *evidence* that day? Were his conclusions evidence-based and related to the research described? Absolutely not. There was certainly no evidence brought to the event to refute any of the claims made by the researchers.

Until such time as Greg Brooks wrote his report, I did not feel free to comment on the seminar. What if, after all, Brooks did take on board some of the important issues mentioned and what if he did address such aspects as the worries about 'guessing' from cues/clues and learning words as whole shapes prior to learning letter/s-sound correspondences? Certainly at the seminar I had taken advantage of the ample opportunity to mention these things and the researchers had been unanimous in their criticism of the NLS.

Did it look as if anyone in the DfES and Ofsted could demonstrate sufficient courage and objectivity to draw honest conclusions from research and classroom results and conduct an honest investigation into worries raised by many knowledgeable and experienced researchers and practitioners?

Not so far.

The questions which should have been addressed transparently at the DfES phonics seminar were either not addressed or addressed by one side only. There was no 'debate' and the conclusions were not based on the evidence of the research presented on the day. There was no honest examination of the NLS and its programmes and how they should be adjusted.

My response to Greg Brooks's report: 'Sound sense: the phonics element of the National Literacy Strategy. A report to the Department for Education and Skills. July 2003'

It is interesting that Brooks felt the need to state from the outset of his report “‘Reading is making sense of print’ (Moustafa, 1996:7), writing is making sense in print, and meaning must be the heart of the enterprise. Phonics is purely a means to this end, not an end itself.”

This epitomizes half of the trouble with the reading debate. Over and over again the inference is that phonics proponents are so steeped in phonics promotion that they are not interested in reading for meaning. Phonics proponents are *so* interested in reading for meaning that they are dedicated to ensuring that *all* children are able to read the words on the page in the first place. Greater decoding ability enables greater comprehension. It does not guarantee comprehension, but guarantees a better chance that comprehension takes place and takes place accurately. It guarantees that the child is so fluent and automatic with decoding that full attention can be given to the comprehension processes close to the level of the child's oral comprehension.

Brooks states at the bottom of p.1: “*This report is intended to ensure that we shall be much further on [in another four years].*” I maintain that until someone in great authority grasps the nettle about the damage from guessing words and memorising words as whole shapes, we shall not be much further on in another four years.

On p.2, Brooks states: “*I endorse the NLS's ongoing provision of materials and training to address these issues. (Issues raised about word-level objectives from Year R to Years 3 and 4 in the Ofsted report paras 49 – 52, para 57 and para 59.)*” Does Brooks believe that the NLS provision of materials and training is as good as, better than, or inferior to phonics programmes such as Fast Phonics First, Phono-Graphix and Jolly Phonics? How is the NLS team measuring up in terms of being able to produce materials and training that is likely to lead to the most effective teaching based on evidence to date?

Does Brooks have full confidence in the NLS Early Literacy Support early intervention programme (ELS), the withdrawal of which has been called for by the Reading Reform Foundation? Is he aware of comparative studies of the various phonics programmes and the improved results at schools changing to the commercial phonics programmes, Fast Phonics First or Soly's Early Reading Research compared to using the NLS programmes and training advice? What are the results of any comparative studies? How can we find out?

Brooks goes to some length to describe the process of all the report writing associated with the phonics seminar, the tos and fros, the amendments and revisions following discussions. Sadly, this process was confined to the invited speakers, the NLS team, the DfES and Greg Brooks. This denied some renowned analysts a good opportunity to contribute objective scrutiny and attention to detail of the reading debate in the public domain via the DfES website. [*However, I have included the responses of Jennifer Chew and Professor Diane McGuinness to the original NLS phonics seminar paper on pages 17 and 18 of this RRF newsletter.*]

On p.2, Brooks lists the issues known to have been raised by Ofsted including issue no. 8 “*The evidence from the considerable amount of research that has been conducted in the UK since the NLS was introduced.*” Brooks falls into a trap of his own making when he (facetiously?) follows this on p.3 by stating “*Issue 8 can be similarly dealt with very swiftly: there has not been a considerable amount of relevant research in the UK since the NLS was introduced.*”

Precisely! The RRF has long argued that the DfES and NLS team have made a mess of writing their programmes (on some of which we have provided detailed critiques in the RRF newsletters and in our correspondence to high places. See the following RRF newsletter references on the RRF website: no. 45, pages 6 and 18; no. 46, page 20; no. 47, page 12; no.48, pages 15 and 32; no. 49, page 11). **There has been a failure to base the NLS advice on reading research and a failure to research the effectiveness of the programmes themselves compared to other programmes and approaches.**

And yet Ofsted has reacted publicly to this poor practice by the DfES. In October 2001 Ofsted stated in its report, ‘*Teaching of Phonics: A Paper by HMI*’ (ref. HMI 329):

“Those with the responsibility for the management of the strategy should:

- *consider, in any revision to the NLS framework for teaching, the scope for raising expectations of the speed with which pupils can acquire and apply phonic knowledge and skills in the foundation stage and Key Stage 1*
- *consider publishing criteria which schools might use to judge the extent to which commercial phonics schemes support the systematic teaching of phonic knowledge and skills”*

The NLS managers have known for several years that results from synthetic phonics research (for example, the ‘Clackmannanshire’ project) and reputable synthetic phonics programmes were worthy of note, and yet clearly they have **avoided transparent comparison** with their NLS programmes at all costs.

I find this unacceptable in this day and age. What, for example, has Baroness Ashton done to address the situation after her admission to Lord Prior’s questions in the House of Lords in December 2001 (see RRF newsletter no. 48, p.17) that the Early Literacy Support programme was not scientifically tested? Did this not ring serious alarm bells for her? Did the Baroness ever investigate the exemplar synthetic schools as she promised?

What have the consecutive Ministers of Education done to address such failings and lack of accountability? Why has the Select Committee for Education and Skills not been prepared to investigate such a serious state of affairs? This state of affairs is FAR from the case in Scotland where the Scottish Executive has insisted on pre- and post-testing of control and comparison groups for researchers to qualify for any funding.

One extremely important issue which Brooks does not even raise in his list of 17 is the intense criticism that the searchlights model has come under beyond Ofsted’s observations (issue no. 4: *“The searchlight model...has not been effective enough, [para 58]”*), that the model is widely manifested/interpreted, both directly and indirectly, as a range of reading strategies which promote guessing/predicting words from word shapes, picture, context and initial letter cues. These types of reading strategies are criticised in the reading research [*see the statement taken from p.1 of Ehri’s paper*]. Nowhere is this so evident as in the Early Literacy Support manual which is bereft of good phonics advice despite the fact that it is an early intervention programme.

Some time ago I received a letter from an HMI stating that “Ofsted does not approve of guessing”. I would suggest that if this is indeed the case, then Ofsted needs to make this publicly well-known, and the DfES needs to examine its role in promoting guessing through its programmes and ‘reading strategies’. What is David Bell’s position regarding this matter? What does Janet Brennan (HMI for phonics) promote?

I mentioned worries about the ELS programme several times at the DfES phonics seminar – in particular the fact that no-one in the DfES and NLS team would respond to the issues the RRF raised about this programme, and all the guessing which the NLS searchlights model and the NLS programmes promote generally. Clearly my protests were to no avail as there was no response during the seminar or in Brooks’s subsequent report of the seminar. Is this a deliberate ploy because some elements of the NLS are indefensible so it is safer to ignore the critics altogether? Or is it the case that Brooks and others are simply not knowledgeable about the contents of the ELS programme? Are they incapable or unwilling to argue the case for the ELS programme?

On p.3, Brooks writes *“The phonics element of the NLS had other critics besides Ofsted. On one side were those who maintained that it did not take a strong enough line, while on the other were those who not only did not want phonics to have more prominence but wanted it rolled back – both groups were represented on 17 March. Typical of the former was Debbie Hepplewhite of the Reading Reform Foundation, who was quoted in the Times Educational Supplement of 15 November 2002, p.9, as saying: ‘Synthetic phonics is the key to success in literacy in this country. The National Literacy Strategy has got it wrong all these years’ (Issue 7). No such handy quote is available from the opposing camp, but some Early Years experts are known to be sceptical of the drive to introduce children to formal literacy instruction, including phonics, at even younger ages, and few would want its introduction postponed (Issue 9).”*

I was mystified to learn about this conflict at the seminar and wondered which ‘group’ apparently wanted phonics to be “rolled back”. I was also unhappy that an early introduction to phonics was being labelled as part of “the

drive to introduce children to formal literacy instruction, including phonics, at even younger ages.” Take for example the Jolly Phonics’ multi-sensory, evidence-based approach which has revolutionised learning to read and spell in the past ten years with children aged 3+. Surely the success and enjoyment levels counter the fatuous idea that teaching specific information and skills, albeit at an early age, constitute ‘formal’ teaching? The formal/informal debate is an area which I do not choose to pursue in this article, but the RRF is not a group pushing for ‘formal’ education at even younger ages – just evidence-based, multi-sensory teaching and learning that children take thoroughly in their stride and which some teachers have described as ‘life-changing’ on their own behalf having been amazed by the children’s responses and the raised literacy levels resulting from a change of teaching approach.

What is relevant to the early years debate is the advice for early years teachers in the ‘*Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*’. This is a government-generated manual where literacy advice for the 3 to 5 year olds is dominated by whole language, whole word memorisation, look-say and real books. Whilst there is some mention of learning letter/s-sound correspondences, the skill of sounding out and blending all-through-the-word (synthesising) is not made explicit. Foundation Stage children are, nevertheless, expected to start reading books, emulating the reading behaviour of the adults. Such guidance is inadequate, not based on science, and in danger of at least some children acquiring bad reading habits even before the age of 5. It certainly does not properly educate and inform the practitioners themselves about the science of early reading or the literacy debate. Therefore, what the children receive in the form of literacy in their early years settings is very much left up to chance and unlikely to be the best start unless practitioners take the initiative to use child-friendly synthetic phonics and to follow the programmes as the authors recommend – not as the government recommends in manuals such as the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* and *Progression In Phonics*.

Professor Brooks describes some “*general principles*” on p.6 and states that “*There should no longer be any dispute that phonics is part of the main highway to success in literacy teaching.*” He goes on to say “*Phonics is necessary...but not sufficient*”. Brooks argues this point saying “*the insufficiency of phonics on its own is proved by the complexity of English orthography*” and he estimates “*that the spelling system of English is about 75% regular.*” Does Brooks fully appreciate that children taught well by the Synthetic Phonics approach are so much more attentive to letter detail and order and irregularities than those with a background of looking at words as ‘wholes’ and who guess their way through text? I consider that the importance of phonics for reading and the importance of phonics for spelling is totally underestimated and misunderstood by those people steeped in the philosophy of the need for a ‘range of reading strategies’ and the belief in the need for an initial sight vocabulary. Over and again I realise that people just do not know how children can learn to decode and encode better at young ages when taught well by synthetic phonics teaching. I wondered just how many attendees at the seminar had actually visited good synthetic phonics schools and seen the knowledge and abilities of the children themselves and the superior results for both reading and spelling. I wondered how many of the seminar attendees had actually TAUGHT young children to read and spell based on synthetic phonics principles.

To me there IS no argument that “*the insufficiency of phonics on its own*” is “*proved by the complexity of English orthography*”. In any event, synthetic phonics teaching includes *looking* at the tricky part of irregular or unusual spellings. Phonics proponents do not argue that reading, or learning to read, is about “*phonics on its own*”. Such an idea is ludicrous. What we do argue is that:

- rigorous phonics teaching empowers the learner to decode efficiently and automatically including new/unknown words
- rigorous phonics teaching empowers the learner to be more knowledgeable about spelling variations and irregularity of spellings, to pay more attention to the detail of spellings and improve spelling ability
- rigorous phonics teaching empowers the learner to focus on content, comprehension and enjoyment of literature
- rigorous phonics teaching leads to more accurate readers and writers
- rigorous phonics teaching reduces the incidence and effects of dyslexia
- rigorous phonics teaching leads to more confident children/adults and reduces the likelihood of children/adults becoming disaffected with education and society
- rigorous phonics teaching reduces literacy special needs and improves literacy results helping to maximise children’s academic potential

If Brooks had visited good synthetic phonics schools he would surely not refer to children being required to do their own sounding out and blending as a “*North Face of the Eiger attitude*” (p.18). Does this illustrate Brooks’s lack of first hand observations of schools following this practice if he considers that it is the “*hardest route*”? How can it be that this “*hardest route*” appears to get the best results and raise test results and eliminate the gender gap in schools where they change to this method?

Based on Seymour et al’s findings “*that English-speaking children take two to two and a half times as long to reach the same level of competence as children learning literacy in less complex languages with shallower orthographies*”, Brooks gives several suggestions as to why the complexities of our language would justify the learning of an initial sight vocabulary. But Brooks’s arguments are not acceptable as they can be strongly countered by research which illustrates the dangers of children learning an initial sight vocabulary prior to learning the alphabetic code. On p.8 Brooks states “*Though I know of no experimental evidence of the question, I support the teaching of a small initial sight vocabulary.*” This is extraordinary! One could easily surmise that this is a diplomatic move to support the inexplicable summing up of Professor Hopkins at the seminar where, despite the testimony and criticism of the researchers, Hopkins concluded that the promotion of an initial sight vocabulary and the searchlight reading strategies would remain. Why do both professors continue to draw such ‘individual’ conclusions when purportedly leading a debate which is looking at scientific evidence and examining whether the National Literacy Strategy is consistent with that evidence unless some politics or prejudice has crept in? Are they in denial of the evidence that was not only put before them but is also readily accessible in the public domain through the internet.

There is evidence to show that learning an initial sight vocabulary is damaging to at least some children. Learning words as whole shapes from their squiggles (descenders, ascenders) or perhaps initial letter shapes and/or word length give children the entirely wrong message about how the reading and writing system works. Children can develop incorrect reading reflexes and engrained bad reading habits from the tender ages of 3, 4, 5 and 6. And our government materials and training are promoting this!

Significant extracts from Ehri’s seminar paper which illustrate the inadvisability of promoting an initial sight vocabulary and guessing words:

Professor Linnea Ehri herself, flown over from America to describe the findings of the National Reading Panel, writes on p.1 of her paper for the phonics seminar “*People used to think that readers learned to read sight words by memorising their visual shapes. However, research has led us to reject this idea [my emphasis – DH]. Now we know that sight word learning depends upon the application of grapheme-phoneme correspondences. These provide the glue that holds the words in memory for quick reading (Ehri 1992)....Words remain poorly connected when readers habitually guess words from partial letters and contextual clues [my emphasis – DH] without analysing how all letters in spellings match up to phonemes in pronunciations (Ehri, & Saltmarsh, 1995; Stanovich, 1980).*” Please note the dates of these research references.

On p.8 of her paper, Ehri writes “*...when phonics instruction is introduced after students have already acquired some reading skill, it may be more difficult to step in and influence how they read, because it requires changing students’ habits. For example, to improve their accuracy, students may need to suppress the habit of guessing words based on context and minimal letter clues, to slow down, and to examine spellings of words more fully when they read them. Findings suggest that using phonics instruction to remediate reading problems may be harder than using phonics at the earliest point to prevent reading difficulties.*”

Ehri’s comment above is fundamentally important in understanding the best way to teach reading and writing. The findings that she describes should be critical in influencing early reading and writing activities in pre-schools, schools and at mother’s knee. Brooks glosses over the debate re early years reading instruction giving attention only to the ‘age’ factor and the ‘how early to introduce phonics’ factor whilst ignoring the ‘could/will cause special needs/dyslexia’ factor. He displays a lack of attention to the proper detail required for a deep understanding of the reading debate and to the detail of the research presented at the phonics seminar and to the role of the NLS methods in handicapping a substantial number of children in acquiring desirable reading skills.

On p.9 of her paper, Ehri goes on to explain a different type of sight vocabulary from the one advocated by Brooks and Hopkins, one which develops AFTER the introduction of phonics: “*Phonics programmes differ in*

how instruction is sequenced. Some teach children most of the letter-sounds before they learn to read any words, whereas others begin word reading and writing sooner. Once children have some alphabetic knowledge, they need to practise using it to read and write.” [This is a feature of Synthetic Phonics teaching – DH] “To read new words in or out of text, children need to be taught how to decode the words’ spellings. As they practise decoding the same words, connections between letters and sounds are formed for those words in memory and they become able to read those words by sight rather than by decoding. As students practise reading words, they become able to read them automatically. This makes text reading much easier and faster. Of course, learning to read words includes bonding spellings to meanings as well as pronunciations in memory so that word meanings are activated automatically during text reading.”

Another relevant part of Ehri’s paper to the UK debate relates to criticism that the RRF has levelled about the approach to teaching phonics of the National Literacy Strategy where phonics teaching is through separate ‘fun and games’ but is then nowhere to be seen in NLS training materials and manuals for subsequent text-reading activities. It is ironic that the NLS managers in their seminar paper attribute this lack of applying phonics to text reading to teachers’ failures rather than acknowledge it is a failure in the NLS training. [See page 43 of this newsletter for my comments regarding this matter.] Ehri writes on p.9; “*A third approach that is less effective is to teach phonics as a separate subject unrelated to anything else students are taught during the day. For example, children might study letter-sound correspondences for 20 minutes every morning, and then move to reading and writing instruction that bears no connection to the phonics lessons. Research shows that students will not apply their alphabetic knowledge if they do not use it to read and write (Juel & Roper/Schneider, 1985). The best phonics programme is one that is deliberately integrated with reading and writing instruction.*”

Progression In Phonics is an unrelated-to-reading-text phonics programme with very little synthetic phonics emphasis. The letter introduction ‘steps’ focus on consonants and not vowels (which Brooks discusses at length from p.15.) The searchlight reading model with the associated emphasis on guessing from picture, context and initial letter cues has ensured that any phonics learnt is far less likely to feature in the reading of actual text. The NLS promotion of real books and *Book Bands* books instead of phonics decodable books has also ensured that phonics knowledge and skills are demoted/not rehearsed compared to word shape memorisation and various other guessing strategies. The RRF has been writing about this in the RRF newsletters and in correspondence with considerable detail and frequency.

How can Hopkins and Brooks possibly justify the promotion of learning an initial sight vocabulary and endorse the searchlights reading model and the NLS programmes and materials with their ‘mix of methods’ approach having studied the research and heard the testimony and warnings of so many people? Did Brooks and Hopkins not read, or agree with, Ehri’s paper or the consensus of research? This epitomises the reading debate in England. So much of the reading instruction and advice of the National Literacy Strategy does not correspond with the conclusions of research on reading. Even when people such as those in the RRF can give example after example down to the smallest details of why, where, what and how the instructions are flawed – they are the opposite of what the science and classroom findings tell us – there is no recourse. How can this be right?

On p.9 of his paper, Brooks writes “*Elley pointed out (p.58) that ‘Three of the six countries with the largest gender gap start reading instruction at age five – New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago and Ireland.’ These were also three of the only four countries in the survey with a school starting age of five.*” This was part of the argument that early starting ages lead to the gender gap. Brooks at this point does not consider the possibility that it might not be the starting age of formal (or let’s say ‘official’) education that was the factor creating the gender gap, but perhaps it was the whole language, look-say, real books beginning reading instruction prevalent in English-speaking countries which have played a significant role in the subsequent gender gap? [See Bonnie Macmillan’s highly relevant comments on this issue on pages 28 and 29 of this RRF newsletter.] Consider that currently in synthetic phonics schools with children starting as young as 4 and 5, there is no gender gap. Brooks himself points this out on p.10: “*...I would argue that we must search for methods which accelerate the pace of learning once begun without leaving a (subgroup of) boys behind. Ruth Miskin and Alan Davies claim that their methods accelerate learning, as do advocates of Jolly Phonics, represented at the conference not only by its deviser, Sue Lloyd, but also by a presenter who has used it in her research, Morag Stuart (who has used it with children as young as 3). The greater pace in phonics teaching and learning which the NLS has successfully championed is having the same effect. But what about the gender gap? It is reduced in Jonathan Solity’s and in Key Stage 1 results (NLS paper p.12), there isn’t one in Morag Stuart’s, and in Rhona Johnston’s it’s reversed. If*

replicated, these results would suggest that we may be able to reduce or even eliminate the gender gap without necessarily beginning the teaching of reading of phonics earlier than Year R.”

What I find worrying is that Brooks brings up the debate about starting ages, indicates that starting ages might be a cause for the gender gap, speculates that phonics is good for boys because they “*seem to thrive on technologies*” whilst avoiding (?) any discussion about the much-written-about RETARDATION of boys’ literacy development (and other children’s) from the different ways one can teach reading. Furthermore, there is no conclusion about looking more closely at the more successful Johnston’s and Stuart’s research to identify exactly the detail of how the advice (not just the pace) differs from other methods and programmes INCLUDING the NLS. In effect, Brooks avoids any hint that the NLS materials themselves could be CAUSING the continued gender gap and yet isn’t this exactly what we should be looking at as the NLS is the prevailing method foisted on the teaching profession coupled with the understanding that Ofsted is expecting to see it in the schools?

Brooks puts forward definitions of analytic and synthetic phonics teaching starting at the bottom of p.10 and goes on to ask “*Is the NLS’s approach to phonics analytic or synthetic?*” (p.13). Brooks concludes “*In terms of the definitions I have put forward earlier, the variety of phonics embodied in and advocated by the NLS is clearly synthetic, as the NLS paper claims (p.17).*” Brooks then provides as evidence the passage from the *NLS Framework for Teaching* (1998, p.4) which is quoted in the NLS paper (p.5) reinforced by further description pp.5 and 11 of the NLS paper.

The RRF and others are very clear that the NLS is not a synthetic phonics approach. Far from it. The NLS refers to allowing teachers to use “*Progression in Phonics – or equivalent programme.*” So, we must examine which phonics programmes are “equivalent” to Progression in Phonics:

We are very clear that Jolly Phonics, Fast Phonics First, Sounds Discovery, c-a-t = cat (McNee), Phono-Graphix, rml (Ruth Miskin’s Literacy) and ERR (Early Reading Research) are NOT equivalent programmes. These programmes do not promote the learning of an initial sight vocabulary. They do not promote a range of reading strategies such as guessing/predicting from picture, context, or initial letter cues.

The NLS *Early Literacy Support* programme, which one would imagine would have included rigorous synthetic phonics, is bereft of good phonics teaching and is ‘whole language’ in nature. This is extraordinary. Guessing reading strategies predominate without a shadow of a doubt and this is NOT what the scientists would advocate for catch-up. *Progression in Phonics* itself was written in great haste in 1999 because the original NLS Framework for Teaching, written the previous year, was so blatantly flawed. PiPs was launched on the teaching profession untested and, quite frankly, bears no comparison to the commercial synthetic phonics programmes above which ARE based on the reading research.

Brooks claims on p.14: “*...the NLS approach does advocate starting with single letters and is therefore a synthetic phonics programme in Sue Lloyd’s sense.*” Now bear in mind that Sue Lloyd was never invited to the seminar as a speaker and therefore her paper “*Synthetic Phonics – what is it?*” did not qualify to be published along with the other speakers’ papers on the DfES standards site and was also not distributed to the attendees at the seminar. Lloyd’s paper outlines in detail why the NLS cannot be called a synthetic phonics approach. This can be accessed via the RRF website through the ‘newsletters’ page. It is published on p.25 of RRF newsletter no. 50.

As Lloyd goes to some lengths to describe why the NLS is not synthetic phonics, it is UNBELIEVABLE that Greg Brooks would then go on to write in his report that “*...the NLS approach....is therefore a synthetic phonics programme in Sue Lloyd’s sense.*”

In 1991, Kenneth Clarke, then Minister for Education, said in a radio interview “*Successful teachers rely very heavily on phonics as a basic method*”. Here we are in 2004 and we are still arguing about what role phonics has to play in literacy. Everyone may well be paying lip-service to the importance of phonics, but the truth is that the NLS is in the hands of people who have neither demonstrated the expertise or knowledge of research on how best to teach reading, including how to teach phonics, and who still promote reading strategies which confuse children and damage their reading skills – and deny that they do so.

We also have to question what is transpiring in the world of teacher-training. How many trainers have demonstrated an ability to question the NLS reading advice and materials and their relationship to science to date? How many simply promote the NLS without question?

We are getting past the point where certain bodies can pass off their chosen advice to date by the expression the RRF has suggested before now, which is “...**in the light of new evidence, (or Ofsted’s observations/advice) we are adjusting our advice to.....**” I would argue that following this phonics seminar and report, the moment for using the above expression is fast disappearing.

It has to be considered that people are sticking to old prejudices and their personal beliefs about how to teach reading and/or saving face by modifying instructions slowly and painfully, and/or saving face for political and career reasons. Is there a lack of strong leadership in high places? Or alternately, is it SO strong that our evidence and common sense cannot break through those entrenched in their beliefs or those with vested interests?

Brooks makes quite a meal out of the order of letter introduction in PiPs. Good synthetic phonics schools introduce letter/s-sounds so quickly that it matters little what the order is as long as vowels are introduced ALONG WITH consonants to enable the reading and writing of words. Our complaint was that PiPs fails to introduce vowels along with consonants and fails to promote all-through-the-word blending and segmenting from the outset. Not only does PiPs delay putting to use the letters that are introduced, the emphasis on initial letter sounds, then final letters, then medial letters DELAYS the practice of all-through-the-word phonics but FURTHER PROMOTES the learning of words as whole shapes and gives the children entirely the wrong idea about how sounds and letters work.

When you add together the whole language emphasis in the ‘Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage’, the NLS promotion of an initial sight vocabulary, the guesswork reading strategies, the promotion of books based on look-say memorisation or real books where children are confronted with words and letters they have not yet learnt, you can see that any phonics teaching is confused, delayed and diluted. **The children get nothing but mixed messages about how our reading and writing system works and they are given material to read which is beyond them. The teachers themselves also get mixed messages about how reading should be taught. It’s a mess.**

It is a travesty that both Ofsted and the DfES continue to blame the headteachers and teachers for poor literacy results at the end of Key Stage 1 and 2, particularly for the boys. I would have thought that the messages the teachers receive from the NLS about how best to teach reading plays no small part in the state of illiteracy in this country!

On p.19, Brooks asks “*What aspect of teacher knowledge might need improving?*” (Issue 15). All aspects! The RRF has long since maintained that the DfES has failed to inform teachers properly about the reading debate, the international research, the current research in the UK and the results of classroom findings such as those in Gloucestershire, and South Gloucestershire. There are even claims that the NLS is ‘based on research’ that the NLS team has failed to substantiate.

Whilst teachers should be aware of the International Phonetic Alphabet, personally I cannot see why they need to know it in great detail. Better to learn the detail of the phonics and orthography of the English language in order to be able to teach better.

Brooks does his best to examine and explain the searchlights reading model whilst commenting that Morag Stuart’s reading model need not be in conflict. However, from my experiences through receiving NLS training since 1998, I can describe how the searchlights reading model has become associated with the use of a range of reading strategies which promote guessing and this is contrary to the recommendations following research findings. I would suggest, therefore, that this whole issue needs clarifying further. Does the DfES continue to believe that children should learn to read through guessing from word shapes, picture, context and initial letter cues? YES OR NO?

Are the DfES, the NLS team and Ofsted in denial about the manifestation of those reading strategies which promote guessing as signified by the searchlights model –whether this is a ‘misinterpretation’ by teachers and trainers or not?

For example, in the latest NLS training programme ‘*Guided Reading: supporting transition from KS1 to KS2*’ brought out in June 2003 there is a training video which should be as infamous as the appalling ELS ‘Go-Karts’ video. In one clip poor David (Year 2) does his best at reading text clearly applying a ‘range of reading strategies’ including whole word recognition, guessing from initial letters, context etc. with some attempts at sounding out and blending. Teachers are trained to undertake a ‘miscue analysis’ which corresponds with the idea that we are looking for, that is wanting to see, a ‘range’ of strategies to identify unknown words. The training leads to the conclusion that David needs more phonics teaching as he is weak in this area.

The question is NOT asked as to whether David is weak in phonics because he is weak in phonics, or because his teacher is weak at teaching phonics, or because his teacher has been mistrained by previous NLS training and programmes in the teaching of reading and that is why she is weak at teaching phonics. Some people, like me, will recognise that the NLS is responsible for the way that David is reading and that both he, and his teacher, have been misled and let down by the NLS advice. David’s reading style is a product of the interpretation of the searchlight reading strategies and all the NLS training. Furthermore, the type of failings we see in David’s decoding style is frequently noted by educational psychologists and special needs teachers when analysing the problems of children with literacy special needs.

Progression in Phonics should not be re-written, it should be scrapped. Teachers, instead, should be treated as professionals and encouraged to develop professionally by following the debate and looking into the research. How many teachers, for example, will even get to read all the papers from the phonics seminar or are likely to be aware that it has taken place? If the government wants to play a major role in education, it should focus on informing teachers so that the teachers themselves can make informed choices.

I believe that a supplement to PiPs will be rolled out this spring. It is likely to include a change of the teaching steps so that vowels are introduced alongside consonants and it is likely to include the promotion of all-through-the-word blending replacing the current emphasis on initial letters, then final letters, then medial letters.

But consider this – the new supplement would only be promoting such phonics teaching advice twelve years after such advice appeared in the publication of the Jolly Phonics manual, ‘The Phonics Handbook’. BUT – ‘Progression in Phonics’ will STILL be part of an overall approach to reading which promotes learning words as wholes and guessing words from picture, context and initial letters. Therefore, it will still NOT be equivalent to the commercial synthetic phonics programmes. How much tax payers’ money will be squandered to produce this supplement for an inferior reading programme compared to those already out in the public domain? The DfES has made a mistake in publishing its own material as clearly this has led to complications when changes need to be made.

In conclusion, I totally disagree with Professors Hopkins and Brooks. I believe that a “major redirection of the phonics element of the NLS” is both necessary and appropriate. I would also suggest that if Professor Brooks and the NLS managers cannot even recognise that the NLS is a mixed methods/analytic approach and not a Synthetic Phonics approach, how can the DfES “carry out a systematic review and meta-analysis on the relative effectiveness of analytic vs synthetic phonics”?

The conclusions and recommendations on p.24 of Brooks’s paper are, in my mind, way off track. Here I reproduce those conclusions and recommendations and add my own comments:

Brooks’s conclusions and recommendations taken from p.24 of his report:

“My [Brooks’s] overall conclusions are that:

- as David Hopkins said in his summing-up at the conference, **a major redirection of the phonics element of the NLS is neither necessary nor appropriate;**

- but a number of revisions, and some focused research, are needed.

To help guide those revisions and research, I make the following recommendations:

Revisions of the NLS

- 1. Make it clear that, within the 100 most frequent words, only those that are irregular should be taught as sight words.** *[Arguably there are two main kinds of 'sight words' – pre and post phonics teaching. Brooks fails to distinguish the differences.-DH]*
- 2. Convene a focused debate between experts to design and mount research on**
 - the need to differentiate phonics for reading and phonics for spelling
 - whether grapheme-phoneme translation and blending in reading should be taught with or without hearing the teacher say the word
 - how much phonics needs to be taught.

[Who is going to “convene a focused debate between experts to design and mount research” if this March DfES phonics seminar is an example of ‘debate’? Is this really the research necessary to move teaching forwards? Who was consulted about this? -DH]

- 3. Re-organise Steps 2-4 of the sequence for teaching phonics in accordance with the criteria of frequency, regularity and usefulness.**

[Yet more public money should not be wasted on revising Progression in Phonics. Who will be accountable for this weak and untested programme even with its ‘tweaks’? Just inform the teachers about the research and debate and then they can follow the ‘teaching principles’ with whatever programmes or materials that they decide.-DH]

- 4. Tidy up the phonetics.**

[Fine, but this is a small detail in the scale of things.-DH]

- 5. Strengthen the explanations of the status and intended application of the searchlight model, adopt Morag Stuart’s model alongside it, and add a model of reading comprehension.**

[The DfES and NLS team have a responsibility to open their minds about the searchlights model representing and promoting guessing strategies which are NOT a substitute for the attention to efficient and automatic decoding. This is a huge unanswered issue and Brooks does not have the right answer.-DH]

Focused research

- 6. Before starting phonics even earlier, check if current initiatives are reducing the gender gap in reading attainment.**

[The DfES knows which initiatives are reducing the gender gap in reading attainment. It is teachers who need to know. The ‘starting age’ and ‘formal teaching’ issues are arguably red-herrings. The fundamental questions are: Which initiatives are reducing the gender gap the most and why? What prevents us from reducing or eradicating the gender gap? What is it that prevents the DfES from being transparent about this issue? -DH]

7. Carry out a systematic review and meta-analysis on the relative effectiveness of analytic vs synthetic phonics.

[How can we do this under the DfES auspices? There is not yet a consensus about whether the NLS is analytic or synthetic or indeed what kind of programme it is in its entirety. To date, international conclusions have already been reached that synthetic phonics is more effective than analytic.-DH]

8. Research which letters and letter-sounds are most useful to beginners.

[We do not need research into which letters and sounds are most useful to beginners. We just need to include vowels along with consonants and promote all-through-the-word blending and segmenting.-DH]

9. Investigate incorporating International Phonetic Alphabet training into initial and continuing teacher education.

[The International Phonetic Alphabet is important generally, but does not need over-emphasising.-DH]

And above all

10. Move the debate on to researching and improving comprehension.”

[I have no argument with “researching and improving comprehension”. The early reading/phonics debate, however, has not been PROPERLY addressed by the March DfES phonics seminar, or Brooks’s paper which is unsatisfactory, and it is a mistake to assume that “we need to move the debate on...”-DH]

We have a long way to go before truly evidence-based reading instruction reaches all the teacher-training establishments and the teachers – and benefits the children in all the classrooms.

Here are the fundamental questions:

Does the NLS advice correspond with the research and classroom findings?

If not, why not, and what will be done about it?

Who is responsible for ensuring that this issue is transparently and honourably addressed?

My Thoughts:

The government undertook an enormous responsibility to develop a national literacy strategy which I am sure was an act of genuine concern for educational standards in this country. But what those in charge then failed to do was to go about such a project in a complete research-based and scientific manner. Having initially demonstrated some degree of social and educational concern, the Powers are not now demonstrating any responsibility or accountability for the lack of rigour in this exercise - nor demonstrating a true will to put things right. At this point we might surmise that we have witnessed historic influences in reading instruction, politics, diplomacy and incompetence - but at what point do we collectively and publicly question the ongoing whitewashing of this situation, ignoring the research and turning a blind eye to the actions of those in charge and the actual content and advice of the NLS programmes?

Where is there any genuine concern for ordinary children and educational standards if obviously flawed national advice continues to persist? Woolliness in this debate will no longer do. It has gone on far too long. Someone has to ask these difficult questions and someone should be accountable for answering these difficult questions.

A response to selected points in ‘Teaching Phonics in the National Literacy Strategy’ – the NLS paper prepared for the March 2003 DfES phonics seminar

By Jennifer Chew

The following is not a full response to ‘*Teaching phonics in the National Literacy Strategy*’ (TPNLS), but offers views on three related points which are particularly important in the current climate:

1. BLENDING (last paragraph on p. 11)

This paragraph clearly describes the NLS version of ‘blending’ as something which takes place *after* the whole word has been pronounced and segmented into phonemes; letters are used to represent the phonemes thus produced, not to prompt the production of phonemes. This is a spelling routine. By contrast, the genuine synthetic phonics version of blending is part of a *reading* routine, where the pronunciation of the whole word is the *product* of sounding out and blending, not a precursor to it. The NLS version of blending simply takes children back to a word heard a few seconds earlier. In real reading, however, the target word is not heard in advance but has to be retrieved from among thousands in the child’s oral vocabulary by the production of the phonemes indicated by the letters and the blending of those phonemes. By comparison, the NLS version of blending for reading, though not totally pointless, is very weak, providing little real exercise for children’s blending muscles.

If ‘going from the segmented word back to the blended word’ is just an *introductory* step (as may be implied by this paragraph of TPNLS), where, in the NLS materials, is the work on *real* blending – synthesising grapheme-prompted phonemes to work out a pronunciation which is not already known?

2. ‘SYNTHETIC’ VERSUS ‘ANALYTIC’ PHONICS (pp. 16-18)

As TPNLS points out, the situation is complicated by the fact that ‘there are subtly different interpretations of the terms “analytic” and “synthetic” in the literature’ (p. 17). It then selects one of these interpretations (‘synthetic’ means ‘direct/explicit’ rather than ‘indirect/implicit/constructivist’) to argue that the NLS approach is synthetic. The problem is that although the NLS may indeed meet criteria of explicitness in some respects, it is not particularly explicit in its teaching of genuine synthesising. It *does*, however, meet a key criterion of ‘analytic phonics’ as expressed in the Feitelson and National Reading Panel (NRP) extracts on TPNLS p. 17: whole words are ‘taught’ (Feitelson) or ‘identified’ (NRP) first and then analysed. If even blending (synthesising) starts with the whole word, as TPNLS itself says is the case (see **1.** above), the case for calling the NLS ‘synthetic’ is weak.

Bielby, cited on p. 16, calls the NLS ‘synthetic’, but he, like TPNLS, equates ‘synthetic’ with ‘explicit’ without considering how explicitly synthesising is taught. His work shows that he himself believes in analysis after the acquisition of ‘a sight vocabulary of whole words’. By contrast, Chew regards the NLS as non-synthetic because of its lack of emphasis on synthesis as a word-identification strategy for previously unidentified words, which is the true function of synthesis in reading. Contrary to what is suggested in TPNLS (pp. 16-17), however, Chew did not say unequivocally in RRF Newsletter 45 that the NLS was ‘analytic’, but just that ‘most of the work on phonemes.... leans towards the analytic end of the spectrum, frequently with the assumption that the word is first recognised as an unanalysed whole’.

To counter the allegation that the NLS ‘leans towards the analytic end of the spectrum’, can it be shown that the NLS materials give equal attention to activities involving synthesis as a means of word-identification in reading and analysis of words already identified?

3. THE NLS SEARCHLIGHTS MODEL (pp. 13-16)

The OFSTED report ‘The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years 1998-2002’ criticised the searchlights model on the grounds that it ‘gives insufficient emphasis in the early stages to the teaching of phonics’ (p.3). OFSTED also stated that this model

‘has not been effective enough in terms of illustrating where the intensity of the “searchlights” should fall at the different stages of learning to read.... [B]eginning readers need to learn how to decode effortlessly, using their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and the skills of blending sounds together. The

importance of these crucial skills and knowledge has not been communicated clearly enough to teachers' (p. 17).

The first need of beginners is indeed to learn to decode. This should mean that letter-prompted sounding out and blending is done as a *means* to identify words, not *after* words have been identified. Decoding/word-identification should be 'context-free' (Perfetti in *Journal of Research in Reading*, 18/2, 1995, p. 108). This view is based on research and common sense, not on 'ideological preference' as TPNLS suggests (p. 16). Accurate decoding often suffices to ensure comprehension, especially with simple beginners' texts. If decoding does not produce comprehension, grammar and context can then be considered. TPNLS, however, accepts the use of 'syntactic and contextual inferences' (p. 14) for *word-identification* purposes in text-reading. Admittedly it adds that children should "'loop" back to the phonic and orthographic features of new words' but this, as in NLS-type blending (see 1. above), is phonics *after* word-identification, *not* phonics for 'context-free' word-identification and not even phonics used 'simultaneously' with the other searchlights as recommended on p. 1 of *Progression in phonics* (PiPs). No wonder phonics is under-used in text-reading. The message to teachers on pp. 1-2 of PiPs can easily be interpreted as follows:

Let the children continue to read 'familiar and predictable' texts (e.g. from 'Book Bands'), where they 'can often rely heavily on contextual and grammatical knowledge', but get them now to pay more attention (rather than 'relatively little attention') 'to the sounds and spellings of words'. Let them still be dependent (though not 'over-dependent') 'on remembering or guessing their way through the text', exactly as illustrated on NLS videos, but make sure that their 'limited phonic strategies' become slightly less limited. Indeed, they don't really need 'to rely more on their ability to decode individual words' until 'later', when 'the familiarity of texts diminishes'.

TPNLS states that 'the ability to decode words remains the first and only direct means of getting meaning from the page' (p. 4). But does this square with the NLS's great stress on using phonics *after* words have been identified or, at best, *simultaneously* with the other searchlights?

A Response to 'Teaching Phonics in the National Literacy Strategy'

By Professor Diane McGuinness

I recently received two packets from England containing copies of the same document each with an appended note to the effect: 'What do you think of this?' The document was a 'working paper' on the NLS, intended to introduce a dialogue on phonics teaching, and to set out the current position of its authors regarding phonics and the Literacy Hour. As my work was cited in this document to support certain curriculum choices and other arguments, I am using this forum to respond to the invitation for dialogue and to answer the question my friends posed.

I am concerned about two issues discussed in this document. The first has to do with the overlap of real books activities with phonics instruction during the Literacy Hour in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. The second has to do with the sequence of phonics instruction presented on page 8 of the document.

To clarify my position on these two issues, I want to provide some facts.

1. Reading, spelling, and writing involve two basic skills: knowledge of the written code (reading mechanics) and being able to comprehend language (listening comprehension). You can't comprehend what you read if you can't decode and/or if you don't comprehend what people say. Across the school years, reading comprehension is almost perfectly predicted by a combination of two tests: a test of decoding skills and a test of listening comprehension (combined correlation is around .90). This body of research is so consistent that the statistical values from one study to the next are almost identical. This means there is nothing 'special' about reading comprehension. That is, it isn't necessary to teach comprehension by having children read. You can teach it just as well by having a conversation.

2. Children learn early on that books convey meaning through printed words. If they never learn that print is ‘a code’ for sounds in our speech, or if they receive contradictory or conflicting instruction, most children *prefer* to adopt a ‘sight word’ (whole word) strategy. This seems ‘natural,’ it is easy to do initially, and has some immediate success, that is, until visual memory starts to overload. A ‘sight word’ strategy takes one of two forms: visual memory alone, or decoding the first letter phonetically, plus guessing the word based on its length and patterns of ascenders (*b, d, f, h, k, l, t*) and descenders (*g, h, p, q, y*). These strategies have been observed and documented many times in the clinic.

In my research on reading strategies in the schools (McGuinness, 1997), I discovered that nearly all children used a whole-word guessing strategy at the start of Year 1 (age six). By the end of the school year, one-third of the children remained primarily ‘whole word guessers.’ When the children were followed up two years later, the ‘whole word guessers’ had not changed their spots. They still made many of the same errors on the same words on the same reading test they had made two years earlier, and they were far and away the worst readers in the class. Surprisingly, many of these children scored in the superior range on a vocabulary test. This tells us that becoming a whole-word (sight-word) reader is not due to low verbal skills, but is a *high risk factor* in the general population, and **something teachers should curtail at all costs.**

3. There are three large-scale, observational studies in the literature on how children spend their time in the classroom. Using large numbers of classrooms, each child was individually monitored for extensive periods of time. When ‘time-on-task’ (what each child actually did and how long he did it) was correlated to various measures of reading, only two activities contributed to reading skill across the early years: a) Phonics activities, specifically learning sound-to-letter correspondences, and segmenting and blending practice. b) Writing of all types: tracing, copying, writing from memory, words, sentences, stories.

Several ‘reading activities’ were unrelated to reading (correlations at zero), such as memorizing letter names, learning about concepts of print, segmenting syllables, etc. More importantly, some activities were *negatively* correlated to reading skill. This was true for time spent memorizing ‘sight words,’ and most particularly for teacher led ‘language arts’ activities, such as lessons on vocabulary and grammar, and story time. The ‘language arts’ activities were negatively correlated to *reading comprehension* at very high values ($r = -.70$ to $-.80$), meaning there was an almost perfect linear relationship between them. In other words, the more time children spend in teacher-led ‘language arts’ activities, the *worse reading comprehension scores become.*

There are two possible causes for this result. One is that it reflects a simple trade-off: the more time you spend on language activities, the less time there is available to learn the code. The second cause is more alarming. It is possible that practices in these teacher-led activities, such as ‘reading along’ or doing ‘vocabulary’ work in the context of looking at ‘real books,’ actively undermines phonics instruction. Whichever one is true, this is bad news for the Literacy Hour, certainly during the period when children are trying to master the code.

The evidence from the highly successful phonics programmes (Jolly Phonics, Phono-Graphix, Lindamood, Lippincott) is clear and consistent: ***Teach the alphabet code and get on with it.*** And when you’ve done this (a process taking about 11-20 weeks), move on to other reading skills, such as fluency practice, adding spelling alternatives, and reading comprehension.

Taken together, the evidence does not support the position taken by the NLS group:

“Shared, guided and independent reading and writing are also key features of the methodology covered by the literacy hour. -- Children should be taught to apply and coordinate a range of reading strategies in a connected way such that each reinforces the other and all contribute to the development of fast early fluency and comprehension.” (pg. 15)

The Reading Reform Foundation made a similar argument against this view, stating that introducing multiple strategies at an early stage of reading instruction will be “mutually contradictory and will confuse rather than assist young readers.” The NLS group does not agree, but they miss an important point. No one who supports a phonics first approach to mastering the code is claiming that ‘phonics instruction’ can magically suffice for all remaining forms of literacy instruction. **The point is simply that if you are teaching the code, don’t open the door to encouraging inappropriate decoding strategies.**

The NLS proponents, in a further rebuttal to the RRF commentary, miss a second and equally important point:

“This exclusive approach [meaning phonics] precludes teaching any kind of hypothesizing, problem-solving, predicting or inferring, which are pejoratively dismissed as ‘guessing’ on the grounds that they interfere with the proper business of reading.” (pg. 15)

As we have seen, reading comprehension, which is the real goal of learning to read, is completely linked to decoding and to *listening* comprehension. There is no reason whatsoever, why ‘hypothesizing, problem-solving, predicting, or inferring’ can’t take place during natural communication – i.e. *speaking and listening*. The teacher can read a story and ask the children for information concerning what they think the story is about (hypothesis); how they would get out of trouble if they were the characters in the story (problem-solving), what they think the outcome might be if the characters persist in their plan of action (predicting), and speculate on how they got into this mess in the first place (inferring). ***There is nothing unique about reading comprehension.***

The concerns of the NLS group do make sense IF they are based on erroneous assumptions, such as: it takes three years to learn the code, or ‘language arts goes out the window if phonics lessons dominate.’ But these are false fears, and they melt into insignificance in light of what is really true. They are also dangerous fears, because they are holding us back.

The second issue, the alphabet code itself, is of particular concern, especially as my suggestions for teaching a Basic Code (40+ phonemes and their most common spelling) are outlined on page 7 (middle paragraph). There are other problems that come in here, such as their rationale for teaching the first 6 phonemes, but I will focus on the main problem. It appears that the NLS group does not really understand synthetic phonics or the nature of a Basic Code. They provide brief summaries, and list programmes based on these principles, stating that they “work on similar lines” to what they have designed, yet this is far from the case. On page 8 there is a chart of a sequence of ‘steps’ with lists of phonemes on the left, and lists of graphemes (letters, digraphs, phonograms) to be taught on the right. There is no connection whatsoever between these two lists.

The NLS paper states that good phonics teaching involves teaching “the most common spelling” for each phoneme, yet there are only 11 phonemes on their list. The remaining 30+ phonemes are nowhere to be seen. On the right side of the page, there are seven lists containing a total of 62 graphemes. Anyone who understands how the code works, will immediately see a shift in logic. The code is now almost entirely letter-driven (visual), having nothing to do with the stated goal: “teach how graphemes map on to 45 phonemes.” Not only this, but the order of these graphemes across steps 3 – 7 has no connection to the structure of the spelling code.

At step two, the child hears six phonemes and sees the six common spellings for those phonemes. But at step three, everything changes. Suddenly, the young reader is confronted with a batch of unrelated letters and digraphs which are not linked to phonemes in any way. (These are ss, ck, l, n, d, k, sh, ch.) Notice that four higher levels of complexity of the spelling code are introduced as well. Here are: 1) Letter(s) standing for phonemes that have never been taught (l, n, d, sh, ch). 2) Consonant digraphs (ss, ck, sh, ch). 3) Alternative spellings for the sound /k/ (ck, and c taught at step 2). 4) A spelling alternative controlled by phoneme position in a word (ck). There is only one way for a child to handle this, and that is to fall back on visual memory, using the logic that ‘letters make sounds.’ The alphabet principle goes out the window at this point, and there’s no way to get back to it.

There is a reason why programmes like Jolly Phonics and Phono-Graphix are fast and effective, and this is because they ***stick with the logic*** that the NLS document initially describes, but then abandons.

Research Digest

By Jennifer Chew

The whole of this Digest is being devoted to the 2001 *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS). Although the study was carried out in 2001, results were publicised only in mid-2003. The study was conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Over 140,000 pupils in 36 countries participated. In England, 3156 children participated. The testing was carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research, which prepared the report on performance in England. The average age of the international sample was 10.3 years and of the English sample 10.2 years. This age-group was chosen because ‘at this point in children’s development they have learned to read and are now starting to read to learn’ (p. 3).

The headline on the Department for Education and Skills website was ‘English primary pupils are among the best readers in the world’. Further comments were that ‘England’s primary school pupils are the third most able readers in the world behind Sweden and the Netherlands’ and that the study had shown that England was ‘the most successful English-speaking country’. Clearly, the results *do* suggest that England did very well. There are indications, however, that things may not be quite what they seem. In what follows, all page references are to the NFER report on the PIRLS study.

1. As children in England start school earlier than in most other countries, the English children had taken 5+ years to reach the level reached in other countries in 4 years or less (pp. 3, 8, 62). In addition, ‘The pupils in the England sample had 958 hours of instructional time per year as against an international average of 837 hours’ (p. 64). The extra hours and the extra year(s) mean that the English PIRLS children had had about 40% more instruction than the international average.
2. England had ‘one of the largest ranges of performance’ – although our best pupils are very good indeed, our worst are very poor by international standards (pp. 16, 18, 20).
3. Our children had generally poorer attitudes to reading than children in other countries (p. 48) – this is somewhat ironical in view of the fact that reading for pleasure is emphasised so much in England. Evidently things do not work quite as intended.
4. The English PIRLS sample was not quite as representative as it might have been: there was a ‘slight under-representation of children working at the lower levels’ (p. 4). How much did this affect our international ranking?
5. England’s performance in the 2001 PIRLS study was better than in a similar 1996 study carried out by the NFER (pp. 7, 22), where we were not highly placed but close to the international average. How do we know which of the two studies gives a more accurate picture of our performance?
6. In terms of gender differences, our ranking was low – 28th out of 36 (p. 24-5). As we know, synthetic phonics could make a big difference here.
7. Preschool literacy input was found to be higher in England than in virtually any other country. ‘Children in England start school earlier, show more reading readiness and have a higher level of early learning skills than their international peers’ (pp. 55-60). This must surely mean that a lot of the credit must go to *parents* rather than to schools.

All in all, the position may not be as encouraging as the DfES suggests.

The Writing Road to Reading: The Spalding Method

By Jennifer Chew

In February 2003, while on a visit to the USA, I had the great privilege of visiting a school using the Spalding method in Phoenix, Arizona, and also of visiting the organisation's headquarters. The system, originally developed by Romalda Spalding, was first published as *The Writing Road to Reading* in 1957. The 5th Revised Edition has just been published (2003), edited by Dr Mary North. It remains faithful to the original principle of teaching reading through writing: in fact, reading, *per se*, is not taught at all – after children have spent a few weeks learning to write the Spalding way, however, reading simply develops almost as a by-product. One might have reservations about the theory, but it certainly works in practice!

With my guide, Carole Wile (Spalding's Director of Instruction and Certification), I first spent some time in a kindergarten class in Alhambra Traditional School (a state school). Kindergarten children in the USA are about a year older than Reception-class children would be in England – these had either turned six or would do so during the year. 22 children were present and were sitting in single desks arranged in straight rows and facing the front. The teacher controlled the class single-handedly (there was no classroom assistant) and discipline was mind-bogglingly excellent, with the children speaking only when required to do so (often in chorus) by the teacher. They first did some sky-writing of phonograms such as 'ch', 'ng', 'ay', 'ow', 'oa' etc. They then answered questions showing, for example, that they knew that they would not find 'oi' or 'ai' at the end of a word but that they *would* find 'oy' and 'ay' in that position. Time was spent in writing down words dictated by the teacher and also in reading previously-written words in chorus by sounding them out (e.g. 'tell', 'ask', 'just', 'get', 'home', 'much', 'long', 'house'). In keeping with the principle of putting writing first, time is spent on learning not just underlying alphabetic principles but also word-specific spellings, including those of words containing 'irregularities' (e.g. 'one' and 'some').

We then moved on to a 4th-grade classroom (children aged 9+ to 10+). The work being done was very advanced: an 'average' child was reading a 366-page book for pleasure, and whole-class teaching of spelling included words like 'orchestra', 'parliament', 'perceived', 'precipitous', 'recommend', 'seized' and 'thoroughly'. I was interested to hear the teacher exaggerating the pronunciation of 'temperature' by stressing the long /a/ sound in the penultimate syllable, and of 'endeavor' (American spelling!) by stressing the final 'or' sound. She also pointed out that although one could regard the 'aor' in 'extraordinary' as a phonogram for the 'or' sound, the normal pronunciation of the word concealed the fact that it was made up of 'extra' and 'ordinary' – in other words, she was stressing morphology as an aid to spelling.

Over lunch with six of the Spalding HQ staff, I was able to find out a lot more about the method. Approaching reading through writing is not an idea that we in the UK are very familiar with, and it might not be quite as suitable for children starting formal schooling at 4+ as it is for children starting at 5+, but I nevertheless found myself very much on a wave-length with these people and felt that we might be able to learn a lot from them.

Editor's comment: What I have noticed is a growing fear of teachers over the issue of 'formal' vs 'informal' teaching. I hear many Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 teachers express their insecurity of just how they are 'expected' to teach in their settings. I am sure routine, discipline and explicit teaching are part and parcel of the success of the Spalding method of teaching writing and reading. What will happen in England with the increased focus on 'learning through play' in the FS and the push of this philosophy into KS 1?

Readers' Letters

Dear Readers,

My cry for help to Debbie came last year when my son and I found ourselves in what seemed like a big black hole. At the beginning of my son's grade 3 year his teacher told me that my son was a year behind in spelling. This came as a complete and total shock. I had confidence in that teacher and he said that he would work on it and maybe send some words home once a week. At the end of the year he seemed to have made a slight improvement. My real dilemma began when my son was put into his grade 4 class with the same teacher whom he had had for grades 1 and 2. I, as well as other parents were most unhappy, I particularly, as she had never mentioned to me that Sean was struggling at all. I went to see her at the beginning of last year with the belief that my son was struggling with spelling and she was very reluctant to agree, she felt that "he may be dragging his feet just a little". Shortly after this my son brought his writing book home for me to look at and I was appalled. He had done a piece of writing that was full of spelling mistakes (the word "frome"(from) was ticked as being correct), had little punctuation and one particular sentence made no sense. The teacher made three spelling corrections, ticked the page and wrote "Keep up the good word" and that was the limit of her marking. Sean and I worked through the writing together. When we had finished it was very clear that Sean had tried really hard with his writing and with minimal changes was able to make sense of it. I was furious and presented the book to the principal of the school. The principal and teacher asked that we attend a meeting and so began our spiral down into the big black hole.

The following months were filled with stress, anxiety, and urgency. We began by working through the Spalding method and this did help substantially. We then tried working through Reading Reflex. We seemed to continually be on a roller coaster. My first goals were to teach my son to proofread and to improve his handwriting. The more I learnt about the "Whole Language" theory the clearer my son's coping strategies became. I soon learnt that his poor handwriting was his way of having a 50/50 guess at spelling. His messy "a" could be an "o" or even a "u". We would do some dictation and after he had written it down I would make him read his piece of writing back to me. It was here I realised that he wasn't reading to me, he was remembering the dictation and re-telling it. Often he would read the piece of dictation back to me perfectly but when I actually looked at what he had written it did not match. It was at this point I realised that my son's main literacy skills were remembering and guessing. It was no wonder our sessions were highly stressful situations. I finally understood why he would come up with every excuse to avoid dictation, why he would cause a distraction at every opportunity and why he would see-saw between anger and tears. The worst part of our learning sessions was that he would not interact with me. I think this comes back to school where children are set a task, perform that task regardless of the quality and move on. As long as the child makes some effort, however little it was, then that was ok and no follow up was required. We continued on, with me trying to instill in my son that writing and reading required precision. I did an activity with him which started with a word like "arm" and then tried to show him that by adding just one letter the word changed and so on. (Arm, arms, harms, harmful, harmony, pharmacy)

My son's name is Sean and whenever he would spell a word incorrectly by putting the letters in the wrong order, I would try to point out how significant this was by spelling his name as Sena. It made him realise that it was significant when letters were in the wrong place.

We continued on our roller coaster until one day both of our frustrations erupted into a massive inferno. I told him that I would not waste my time helping him anymore because he did not want to be helped. But from this eruption came a lifeline. Sean voiced all his negative feelings about himself but at the end said "the only thing I am good at is problem solving". It was a horrible time and I regret a lot of what I said. With hindsight, I can now see that I brought a lot of the urgency and anxiety into the situation. My feelings of guilt in not helping Sean in his first years of school really plagued me. I had returned to work and did not have the time that I had been able to take with my other 2 children. I had helped my daughter, and actually taught my other son to read in kindergarten, but did not realise just how important my help had been. I was helping Sean now but constantly wondered if it was too late.

After a week of cooling down Sean wrote me a note asking me to start helping him again. We gave it another go, this time using his problem solving approach. I feel approaching it from another angle really made a difference. I told him spelling was problem solving which slowly made him start to interact with me when trying to spell a word. This helped immensely because he would now tell me *why* he had or hadn't done something and I knew his reasoning behind it. I would also question spellings of words that he had spelt correctly, to test his confidence and to have him consolidate why he has spelt it that way. Also, to help Sean in spelling a word, I would encourage him to take off the ending first and then break it into syllables and then sounds. I found, with the word "talk" for example, that he would spell it correctly on its own but if I said "talked" or "talking" he would often write "torked". I also invented stickers to put on his head, one with a "save" button and the other a "delete" button just like on the computer. Whenever we would come across a word that concerned him we would analyse it and then decide if it was a word that he needed to save because it was difficult, or if it was a word that he did not need to store in his memory because all the sounds were there. I made quite a few references to his brain being like our computer and if he continued to store unnecessary files on it then it would become full and no longer work.

I think it is safe to say that Sean and I have finally turned the corner. All the pieces of the puzzle now fit together properly in his mind and probably most importantly he is channelling his energy into his spelling instead of trying to avoid the situation. He now interacts with me freely about why he put "er" instead of "ur". I make him grade his effort, whether the mistakes he has made are allowable or silly and his grading is more realistic and accurate than before. He now proofreads well and without so much concentration on his handwriting it has improved as well. I would say his handwriting has improved at the same rate as his confidence in spelling. Sean has also shown a renewed interest in reading and last year read all 5 of the Harry Potter books, as well as others and viewed this as a pastime instead of a chore.

Last year was spent catching up and I hope that this year will be spent trying to make extra ground. We have had a big rest since before Christmas but will get back into it soon. It has been a long and lonely road, which we have travelled without any assistance from school. My goal now for Sean is to make all the skills I have taught him become an automatic reflex. His first tendency is still to guess. With time and perseverance I am sure we shall succeed.

Kristin Boucher
Tasmania, Australia

Dear Debbie,

As Deputy Head, I get to see a regular stream of 'naughty boys'. Of course I love them all, want to give them a big hug and tell them it's not their fault, and have to try really hard to look sternly at them over the top of my glasses!

They all arrive at my office door accompanied by a 'good and reliable type' clutching their 'time-out' sheet. This is where they have had to write down their high crimes and misdemeanours along with a promise to do better in the future.

To a man, they cannot spell. Their handwriting is appalling. Their vocabulary is pitiful. And it isn't their fault. It's ours. I feel that we should be the ones writing the apologies.

"Sorry we have failed you Darren. Sorry we have denied you access to how to break the code, how to blend to read and segment to spell. Sorry we haven't taught you how to form and join up your letters properly so that the physical act of writing is not so hard for you.

Sorry we have patronised you with excuses for why you can't read and write **BECAUSE YOU ARE A BOY**. Sorry we don't know what to do with you when you behave badly because you are totally confused and demoralised and anxious when asked to read and write.

Sorry we have listened to all the trendy, nonsensical, uncorroborated piffle peddled by the advisers for too many years, the NLS, the TTA et al, rather than following the logical, verified, research-based methods promoted by the Reading Reform Foundation and other synthetic phonics practitioners and researchers.

Sorry that we have set you up to struggle with reading and writing for the rest of your life and forever narrowing your horizons.”

It is SO hard, Debbie, to put matters right when the boys have had the wrong start and bad habits are well and truly set in, but I don't see Ofsted or the DfES making it explicit that Synthetic Phonics teaching from the outset avoids the gender gap and serves the boys well for the rest of their lives. All the recent literature from Ofsted and the DfES about the gender gap in writing mentions all sorts of ideas ranging from male role models to boys' interests and learning styles, but not a thing about the effectiveness of synthetic phonics teaching and research such as Solity's ERR and Johnston and Watson's Clackmannanshire longitudinal study. Why is this?

Name and address supplied.

The Invisible Enemy

By Alyson Mountjoy

I am not a teacher. I have not stood at the front of a classroom with the unenviable responsibility of educating in my hands and looked out at a class and wondered "How am I going to teach them to read". But I have been there to help pick up the pieces when things go wrong, when a child for some reason, after years of trying and failing, years of remediation, and the best resources money can buy, still can't read above age 6 books at the age of 14.

I have had to look him in the eye when he struggled to complete his English SAT paper, when he begged me to read it to him so that he could at least have a chance to answer the questions. I had to refuse, tears and anger welling in me from the sight of his pain, as he struggled to maintain what little dignity he had left. Watching his confidence slip away a little more, as the feelings of worthlessness grew inside him, compounding his belief that he would never amount to anything so what was the use of trying any more. I hated myself for having to do that to him and also the system that had failed him. An extreme example you may think, but one of the growing numbers of pupils entering our secondary schools with painfully poor reading, spelling and comprehension skills.

That is a situation no-one should ever have to suffer. These children are the ones that provide the statistics that balance out the excellent readers and make a decent average, the thin end of the wedge, the victims of the invisible enemy. What is the invisible enemy you may ask, the answer is simply any disability or condition that prevents a person from learning, like Dyslexia, Auditory Processing Disorder, Semantic Pragmatic Disorder, Dyspraxia, Autistic Spectrum Disorders, Sensory Integration Dysfunction, or Nonverbal Learning Disorders.

I have worked as a special needs support assistant, supporting secondary school pupils with severe dyslexia and I have seen wonderful results, achieved by an individually tailored, multi-sensory remediation plan that focuses on their strengths to help remediate their weaknesses. It works for one simple reason, because it takes a person as an individual and teaches to them in the way that they learn, using their own strengths as weapons against their own invisible enemy. But for many this approach comes too late.

It may seem to be a revolutionary, time-consuming way to do it, but it works. Instead of one route into the brain there are several, thus reinforcing the information. Repetition makes the information stick in the long-term memory, so for those with short-term memory problems it is a double-edged sword. The

three **rs** should now represent **reinforcement** and **repetition** get **results**. The world is not two dimensional, so why teach children in a two dimensional way? Let them live what they learn and in doing so bring enjoyment back into learning, then they will remember it. Make it personal to them, let them explore. Make their learning environment colourful, full of sound and materials to feel and enjoy and they will remember. A battle is never won using one type of weapon at a time but a multi-faceted attack, and the invisible enemy we face is no different to any other.

Why do children spend the first years of their education being taught through multi-sensory methods, only to be told at five years old they cannot do that any more? Young children are natural explorers, they see, hear, feel, move, smell and taste their way through life, but as soon as they get into a formal classroom they are expected to concentrate only on what they hear or see. Those with auditory and/or visual processing difficulties are put at an immediate disadvantage. This leads to panic, poor self-esteem, work avoidance and often disruptive behaviour. Playing the clown or getting into trouble is easier than admitting they cannot even begin the task in hand, preferable to the embarrassment of failure. If work is not done then they cannot be judged by it.

How much better it would be for them if they had never had to go through that, had they been taught in a multi-sensory way from the start, so that no child is ever put in a position of failure, given a sentence of exile and isolation from the rest of the world. Make no mistake, being unable to read is not just something that affects children at school. Without that skill there are implications for qualifications and therefore employment, shopping, paying bills, in fact all areas of life are affected. Being unable to read or spell is also mistakenly seen as an indicator of poor intelligence, so the stigma of illiteracy is so much more than just not reading.

Why then are all children being taught the same way, setting some up to fail while others soar to giddy heights just because they were lucky enough to be born with the right weapons against the invisible enemy, the right learning style to suit the one-size-fits-all teaching method? Is it too much to ask to give every child the chance to soar, by simply allowing them the right to learn in the way they learn and not the way the powers-that-be decide they should learn?

The answer is simple, it is deemed too expensive to use but for the severest of cases, the ones who have already had to suffer pain and humiliation, failure and ridicule. When the cost is balanced with the benefits it would be much more economical to get it right first time, because remediation does not come cheap, but the cost to our children is even greater.

We need a system where children are taught from the beginning using visual, auditory and kinaesthetic cues to reinforce the information we want them to remember, using their strengths to remediate their weaknesses. Compensating and supporting at the same time, and not just for reading. Steps have been made in certain areas, e.g. teaching mathematics using counters and building blocks is now commonplace in primary schools, but by the time the pupils get to comprehensive schools this is frowned upon. So why not replace them with something more age-appropriate and just as effective, those who learn this way do not suddenly change their learning style when they reach the age of 11. With a little forethought and planning all aspects of the curriculum can be taught in this way. Science is taught by doing experiments, why then is reading not taught using extremely successful phonics programmes that employ a multi-sensory approach? Children learn about music and art by doing it, not just reading about it or being told, so there is no reason why we cannot teach reading that way, it is merely a matter of choice.

Language is multi-sensory. It is a collection of written symbols that represent the sounds we hear, and these symbols make words, which in turn make pictures in our mind. Words give names to things we can touch, taste and smell. The sounds are represented by letters that have shapes we can feel. Let the

children see the words, hear the sounds, feel the shape of letters in their hands as they recite the phonemes and look at pictures of the nouns they learn, or write them out saying the letters as they write. Give them all the weapons they need. Let them live the language we are trying to teach them. Choose to put our children first.

There will always be those that need extra help, the ones who have been born with the weakest weapons against the invisible enemy or maybe with none at all. But with the right approach we can fight this enemy, and with time, patience and hope it can be beaten, so that our children will be able to read, write and spell sufficiently well to make a life for themselves, instead of being the casualties of a war they have no place in.

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Editor's comment: Thank you, Alyson, for this touching article. Unfortunately, there is another invisible enemy beyond the lack of multi-sensory phonics teaching you describe. It is the historic and current mistraiding of the teaching profession.

Illiterate boys: The new international phenomenon

By Dr Bonnie Macmillan

Boys are in trouble. Increasingly, it is coming to the attention of anyone who listens to the news or reads a newspaper that boys are struggling to read.

Together two recent international surveys of reading achievement have measured reading ability in more than 50 countries (OECD/Unesco, 2003; Mullis et al., 2003). The results show that at both the age of 9 and 15, boys' reading skills are substantially worse than girls'. For the first time in the history of such surveys, the gender gaps in performance are significantly large in virtually every country.

Of the countries surveyed recently in 2001, 37 were also surveyed in 1991. In 13 of these, where sex differences did not exist ten years ago, they are now in evidence. In addition, the gap between boys' and girls' scores has widened over the last ten years in every country but one. Sex differences in reading are not only showing up in more and more countries, they are also growing larger.

What is happening? Why are boys having such trouble keeping up with girls in their ability to read? And why are more and more boys falling further and further behind?

Speculation about the causes of boys' underachievement

There is much speculation in the media about the possible causes of what is becoming a growing international phenomenon. Many factors have been blamed (see Table 1). These range from biological reasons such as boys' slower maturation, to environmental factors such as the pre-dominance of female primary school teachers.

First, a look at the biological factors: could any of these be the reason that boys' reading skills are inferior to girls'? The sexes do differ biologically. But they always have. Even though, with the advent of new brain scanning techniques, we know more about the sex differences in brain organisation and development than we did ten years ago, these differences have always existed. What have not are the sex differences in reading ability. There are few test figures available, but a large survey of English 11-year-olds in 1957 revealed that there were no sex differences in reading (Morris, 1966). In Scotland, as late as

1992, testing of 8-year-olds revealed no sex differences in reading ability (Scottish Education Department, 1992). If biological differences did not produce gender differences in reading achievement in the past, why should these factors be entertained as a possible cause of the problem now?

Table 1 Proposed causes of boys' underachievement in reading:

Biological factors

- 1) Boys tend to have poorer speech and language skills than girls do
- 2) Boys are more curious, active, and have short attention spans
- 3) Boys' fine motor skills are poorer than girls (printing and writing are difficult and unpleasant)
- 4) Boys are more assertive, competitive (co-operative group learning less appealing to them than it is to girls)
- 5) Higher testosterone levels in the male foetus and during infancy affect a part of the brain governing control of aggressive behaviour (boys are more badly behaved, more disruptive in class)

Environmental factors

- 1) Too many female primary school teachers (gives boys the message that school is a female place?)
- 2) Boys get discouraged when girls are doing well at reading (reading is not 'cool')
- 3) Reading tests requiring written answers disadvantage boys
- 4) Less time for leisure reading than in past (TV, internet, computer games)
- 5) Fathers are not reading enough to, or in front of, their sons
- 6) School starts at an age when boys are too immature to cope
- 7) Schooling fails to engage boys' strong right-hemisphere abilities

As far as the environmental factors go, I could point out that the sex of a child's teacher has no impact on performance (Wilkinson, 1998): that the questions in the recent international surveys of reading ability were largely multiple choice; or that delaying the start of school for a year has no benefits and is likely to lead to a substantial drop in IQ (Cahan & Cohen, 1989; Ceci, 1991; Morrison et al. 1997). (The largest reading ability sex differences in the world occur in countries such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden where children don't start school until age 7). But all this is a rather pointless exercise when there is just *one important reason*, not listed in Table 1, that exposes all of these suggested causes as red herrings.

The real reason behind boys' reading underachievement

Quite simply, boys can read equally as well as girls do, and sometimes outperform girls, in classrooms where they are taught to read by certain methods. They perform just as well as girls regardless of their teacher's sex, their school starting age, the kinds of reading tests they take, or any of the other biological and environmental factors that might be in play. Any teacher that uses these particular methods not only immediately (if inadvertently) eradicates sex differences, but also produces significantly better reading attainment among boys *and* girls than with the use of other methods. In light of the experimental research (see Table 2), many of us are convinced that the steady change in teaching methods over recent decades is *the* cause of the new gender divide in reading ability.

But others are not convinced. In fact, have you noticed how easily the teaching methods idea is dismissed by educators and government officials? Not only is this explanation often blatantly ignored, some (frightened, perhaps, about this possibility?) actually assert that sex differences in reading have been ridiculously exaggerated and are nothing new (Epstein, et al., 1998). Others, while noting that boys' poor performance in reading is being ignored as the "big issue", acknowledge that it is an issue that no one seems able to explain or "knows how to fix" (Johnson, 2003, p. 9). If there *are* any educators who consider the teaching methods idea, even fleetingly, it is likely they ask: why *should* certain instructional methods disadvantage boys? Why should the current methods which we have endorsed for years, and which after all, *include a little bit of everything* (i.e. something for everyone), disadvantage boys?

Table 2 Reasons that point to teaching methods as the cause of the new gender divide in reading:

Causational evidence

- Convincing Scottish research evidence demonstrating no sex differences under a single focus method of instruction (Johnston & Watson, 1998).
- Convincing evidence that *5 years after* this form of instruction boys *outperform girls* in word reading ability by 7 months, and by this time have an average reading age *31 months above their chronological age*; (boys' average reading comprehension and spelling abilities are 5 and 11 months, respectively, above CA) (Johnston & Watson, 2003).
- Convincing research evidence revealing huge achievement differences under different methods of instruction (Grant, 2001; Deavers, Solity & Kerfoot, 2000; Johnston & Watson, 1998; Stuart, 1999; Sumbler & Willows, 1996).

Correlational evidence

- The most dramatic sex differences are occurring in countries widely known for popular 'mix of methods' teaching: New Zealand, Singapore, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Australia, Switzerland, Australia, England, Canada, USA (OECD/Unesco, 2003; Mullis et al., 2003),
- Sex differences in reading do not exist in schools using certain, single focus, methods of reading instruction (Lloyd & Macmillan, 1999; for review, Macmillan, 1997).
- Examination of teaching methods information (included in recent international surveys) shows the adoption of a 'mixture of methods' is now evident in nearly all countries.
- Sex differences in reading developed only recently in Scotland compared to England, after a far more gradual infiltration of the 'mix of methods' approach.

How could teaching methods be to blame?

Perhaps it is the failure to understand this particular issue that leads many educators to discard the teaching methods explanation so hastily. Teaching methods are rarely named in speculating about causes. After all, how could a single factor – the teaching method – possibly produce such large sex differences in reading achievement?

Essentially there are two kinds of reading instruction. For simplicity, and due to biological rather than ideological reasons, I label these two methods the *zero* and the *flaky*. The *zero methods* 'zero in' on teaching just one skill while the *flaky methods* consist of bits and pieces of everything, often described as a 'combination of different methods'. As it happens, the *zero methods* produce no sex difference in reading, while the *flaky methods* produce substantial differences disadvantaging boys.

So finally, the important question to answer is: **Exactly WHY do flaky methods seriously retard boys' reading progress?** The reasons why, including the **relevant research**, are listed in **Table 3**.

Table 3 Why certain methods seriously disadvantage boys and others do not :

| Relevant research | Methods | |
|--|---|--|
| | Flaky | Zero |
| <p>BOYS HAVE –</p> <p>1) A DIFFERENT TIMETABLE</p> <p>- boys have a different timetable of brain development with later development of left-hemisphere (LH) skills than girls (Hanlon et al., 1999).</p> <p>- neural networks connecting the two halves of the brain develop more slowly in boys compared to girls (Habib et al., 1991).</p> | <p>A variety of 'real' books are often introduced from the beginning. Time is spent largely on activities that activate regions in the right-hemisphere (RH) of a boy's brain (memorising stories, sentences, words and word chunks as whole units; use of pictures to guess words). Since girls (aged 4-12) are inclined to focus on details, they will be more likely, in spite of this teaching, to pay attention to the letters within words. Boys, by contrast, are inclined to focus on whole shapes, and so will</p> | <p>Children are not expected to read books from the beginning. Initial teaching focus is on letter-to-sound associations, an activity that links a RH (letters) with a LH (sounds) task. This: 1) forces boys to make the shift from RH to LH processing, 2) accelerates boys' development of LH skills and 3) speeds the growth of neural connections between the two hemispheres of a boy's brain.</p> |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | <p>be more likely to see words as whole shapes, in just the way that they are being taught to do (Kramer, et al., 1996). This kind of teaching, therefore, results in <i>severely retarding the proper development of LH sites, as well as slowing the growth of the necessary right- to-left hemisphere neural links</i>. Due to a different time-table of brain development than girls, boys are more vulnerable to this teacher-inflicted mental retardation.</p> | |
| <p>2) A BRAIN THAT SPECIALIZES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - boys have superior RH visual-spatial skills from an early age (Levine et al., 1999). - boys' brains specialize more - during reading, boys' brains are primarily active in left-hemisphere regions, whereas the activity seen in girls' brains is more bilateral (Pugh et al., 1996) | <p>Teaching practices encourage boys to stay stuck using their RH skills when, compared to girls, the development of LH skills is especially critical to their ability to read. This 'flaky' teaching operates to encourage neural growth in RH brain sites. <i>The wrong neural circuits are developed</i> so that the patterns of brain activity that are seen (via brain scanning), when a child reads, come to resemble <i>those of dyslexics</i> (Sarkari, et al., 2002).</p> | <p>MRI brain scanning shows more clearly than ever before exactly what happens in the brain during normal reading (Sereno, Rayner & Posner, 1998). The 'zero' instructional sequence mirrors these processes exactly: letter identification, letter-to sound translation, blending of sounds, a pronounceable word arrived at, and its meaning accessed from memory. After 80 hours of this kind of instruction, the change in the brain activity of dyslexics is striking. <i>Their brains behave like those of normal readers</i> (i.e. there is <i>more LH</i> versus RH activity) (Simos et al., 2002).</p> |
| <p>3) SOUND-TO-LETTER DIFFICULTY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - boy have greater difficulty than girls translating <i>sounds</i> into letters - but, they are equal to females in their ability to translate <i>letters</i> into sounds (McGuinness & Courtney, 1983). | <p>Letter-sound knowledge, if taught, often involves performing a LH task first. A whole word is shown, teacher pronounces it, asks questions about the <i>sounds</i> (LH) heard in the word in order to infer sound-to-letter relationships. Since sound-to-letter translation is difficult for boys, activities such as invented spelling or the kind of word analysis described, discriminate against boys.</p> | <p>Emphasis is on letter-to-sound translation, where the sexes perform equally. For boys, letter-to-sound translation involves right-hemisphere processing first (identifying the letter), and left-hemisphere processing second (recalling its sound). The task <i>starts with what is easiest</i> for boys.</p> |
| <p>BOYS HAVE –</p> <p>4) FEWER LETTER-SOUNDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - letter-sound knowledge is <i>the</i> most important determinant of early reading success (Sprugevica & Hoiem, 2003). - and, boys have less letter-sound knowledge than girls at start of school (Iverson, et al. 1970). | <p>Letter-sound instruction is incidental, often only during the process of 'reading' books, and usually in the wrong direction for boys (sound-to-letter). Boys, with less alphabet knowledge to start with than girls, are especially disadvantaged.</p> | <p>Letter-to-sound associations are taught in isolation and intensively to begin with, so boys quickly catch up to girls in this fundamentally important area.</p> |
| <p>5) WEAKER VISUAL MEMORY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - at ages 6-8, boys have significantly poorer visual memory abilities than girls - but boys are equivalent to girls in their auditory memory abilities (memory for speech and | <p>Right from the beginning children are taught to memorise written words as visual wholes. Boys ultimately fail compared to girls. Frustration and lack of confidence ensue.</p> | <p>Good visual memory is not needed since every letter in a word is translated one-by-one into <i>sound</i>. (Memory for sounds does not differ between sexes, so there is no discrimination against boys).</p> |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <p>speech sounds) et al,1999; Harrison et al.,1996).</p> <p>6) POORER PRINT TRACKING</p> <p>- boys are not quite as good as girls of the same age in their ability to track print visually across a page without losing their place (Soderman et al., 1999).</p> | <p>Children are expected to develop this tracking ability at the same time as learning to read (via chanting whole texts along with their teacher and memorising whole books). Proper eye tracking skills are disrupted by frequent attention to pictures, guessing at words as whole shapes and attention to only some letters of words. Initial sounds of words are often the focus to begin with, before attending to sounds in final and middle positions of words.</p> | <p>Children not taught to read by chanting whole texts. They receive much practice reading words in isolation before being introduced to readers that contain regularly spelled, easily decodable words. They are taught to sound out <i>all</i> the letters of a word, sequentially one by one, from left to right. This teaching develops the right kind of eye movements, the kind that occur during fluent text reading.</p> |
|--|---|--|

Whether by sheer chance, or a desire to cater to the individual needs of all students, *flaky* teaching methods are characterised by a propensity to dwell on the very practices, due to the biological brain differences between the sexes, that are most likely to retard boys’ reading progress.

By contrast, whether by sheer chance, or careful attention to what best accelerates reading achievement for everyone, *zero* methods manage to circumvent the biological brain differences between sexes that have the potential to cause problems for boys when they are learning to read.

Oddly, *flaky* methods give boys exactly what they don’t need, while *zero* methods give them precisely what they do. Are governments and educators going to tolerate continued discrimination against boys, or is it time for a bit of ‘zero tolerance’?

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Editor's comment: Dr Bonnie Macmillan's article spells out very clearly the issues with boys and the literacy gender gap. What is worrying is that Professor Brooks in his seminar report does not even mention the issue of the mixed methods reading instruction affecting boys detrimentally and yet he refers to starting ages and the pace of phonics introduction. Is this because Brooks is in denial that the NLS promotes the mixed methods approach which, according to the evidence in Dr Macmillan's article, is the main cause of the gender gap in the first place? Surely the DfES phonics seminar and Brooks's report should have scrutinised the gender gap issue in this kind of detail?

We trusted.....The Experts

By Mona McNee

When my son could read and spell three-letter words, I was delighted. He was 7 but he has Downs Syndrome. Moving then to an ESN school with specially qualified teachers, I thought he would go from strength to strength. But for two years he sat with Ladybird Book 2. In despair, and knowing I could do no worse, totally unqualified, Tim and I began to work through the phonics 'Royal Road' readers. Eighteen months later Tim could read and I had to tell the teachers. They had not noticed. They tested him and found, yes, he could read – but they showed no interest in how this had happened. How could a totally untrained person succeed when the qualified had utterly failed? Thirty years later, I realise that I had the benefit of not being mistreated.

But this big question-mark in my mind "What was going on?" led me to thirty years of reading, studying, teaching and, like Sue Lloyd, I have never read or seen anything to make me want to change my simple c-a-t = cat, sounding out and blending. The very people who ought to know best were the ones in key positions, the very people spreading the wrong, harmful ideas. By 1970 the myths based on poor or even anecdotal research were firmly in position, being spread by the battalions running perception management, as opposed to people either on the edge of the establishment or (like me) entirely untrained, unbrainwashed but seeing in their own experience, test results and undamaged common sense the suffering caused by neglect of phonics. But such a big majority (right or wrong) has its own power, and people might well think, "They can't all be wrong." But if a million people believe a myth, it is still a myth. And the 'experts' were in key positions to fight off challenge. For some time Margaret Meek, one such 'expert', was consultant to Yorkshire Television for infant reading. Year after year, teachers assure parents that their child is doing fine, even when (s)he cannot even read three-letter words!

In 1955 Rudolph Flesch's book, "Why Johnny Can't Read" was a best-seller for nine months. The teaching establishment just waited it out, carried on regardless, and formed the International Reading Association to defend their stance. In 1981 Flesch wrote "Why Johnny STILL Can't Read" and this is just as true 20 years later.

In 1972 we moved from Bromley (Kent) to Norfolk and I changed from teaching geography and economics in a secondary school to teaching remedial reading. I now realise that Norfolk had (and probably still has) a very Progressive Local Education Authority and teaching staff. It was a miracle, therefore, that I was appointed at Easter to teach the bottom 20 of a Middle School intake of 120 – the headteacher was nearly at retiring age. At the end of July, I had a hunch that the pupils had learned more in that one term than in the previous two, but a hunch is not good enough. I tested them, compared them with previous results and they had learned about twice as much with me, although my predecessor was (I think) a better teacher of children. I was a better teacher of reading.

Like Sue Lloyd in neighbouring Suffolk, I began to campaign against look-say and to urge phonics-first, but found that the headteachers of the feeder First Schools were at odds with me – even though they knew that their failures would come to me! Eventually, one Toftwood First School head, who had originally said that she would "never give up look-say", acknowledged that I had been rescuing pupils from her school and even recommended to a parent (in another school) that she take her child to me!

I attended meetings of the council Education Committee, handed out leaflets, wrote to the chairwomen (including Gillian Shephard) and got nowhere. Eventually a parent of one of my pupils agitated and achieved a meeting with the Director, Michael Edwards, the English Adviser, Ray Rumsby, and a Tory Councillor. The councillor agreed with what I said. The meeting ended with a vague idea that I might present my ideas to some Norfolk teachers butnothing happened. One brave Labour councillor, Leslie Potter, understood what I was saying and questioned the annual reading results. But, although he was right, the Conservatives mocked his grasp of arithmetic!

When Sir Keith Joseph visited Norwich, I stood on the steps of County Hall wearing my "Ban look-say" shirt, but Mr Edwards practically frog-marched Sir Keith past me, his feet barely touching the ground. No way was Mr Edwards going to let me meet Sir Keith – who was the last Education Secretary to smell a rat. Since then, they have all trusted The Experts.

I joined the Waveney Valley Dyslexia Association and benefited from the work of Dr David Harland, but in the end Lady Sandra Addington (a committee member) insisted that, since help in the end had to come from the LEA,

we must not upset them, and I found I was wasting my time. I helped one or two families in the King's Lynn area, but when they invited Jean Augur to speak, with Gillian Shephard to be present, LADDA (the Lynn and District Dyslexia Association) would not allow me to attend the meeting! Later I spoke to Jean Augur on her own. In her book, "This doesn't make cens senc..." Mrs Augur wrote (in italics) that if all the schools would teach infants the way dyslexics need, dyslexics would learn along with the rest, and nobody would suffer, but since its inception the BDA (British Dyslexia Association) has kept the spotlight on remedial teaching AFTER failure has set in, and by now there is a big invested interest in continuing failure. Sad but true.

When Sir Peter Newsam was Director of the Institute of Education, London University, through his good offices I was invited (twice) to talk to the full intake of future primary teachers. At the end of the second talk, the first question asked was, "How can we follow your advice when it is the opposite of all we hear here?" The teaching they do get, with low expectations, can be seen in Professor Jeni Riley's books. The Institute has also given houseroom to Mrs Margaret Meek (now retired) who wrote in "How texts teach what readers learn" (1998), "Any significant reading research I have done rests on my having treated anecdotes as evidence". In learning to read, you can prove ANYthing by anecdotes – some children learn whatever we do. Margaret Meek must have observed fluent readers and applied what she saw to beginners. She first asked her students what they would need to start beginning readers, and the students offered all the right items – learn the alphabet, sounds, how to blend. She then asked the student to read a difficult piece, pointing out how their previous knowledge helped them – and then applied that to beginners. Judith Graham writes, "The rest of the one-year course would be spent persuading students that the model of reading that we had jointly constructed – one whereby we read by entering into a dialogue with an author – was a model that beginning readers need to operate also. People find this hard to believe." No wonder! She spent "the rest of the year" blanking out their common sense.

The non-phonics (Whole Language) approach is presented in "New Readings" as "exemplars of responsible and creative thinking and teaching. Their origins lie in careful research... What all teachers implicitly know, and what classroom observations make plain, is that children initiate the learning that their teachers are most concerned they should do." Why then millions of failures? Joyce Morris described Whole Language enthusiasts as "phonicsphobics", but campaigns by people like her, Daniels and Diack, and me, are described as "irresponsible attacks on teachers' professional skills." With the total lack of challenge to the wrong ideas, and lack of calls for proper tests to justify the new procedures, the word 'professional' in the matter of teaching reading has become a sick joke.

But Meek was not the first. The idea of 'reading' words from their outline, and not from a succession of letters and blending the sounds, started in America with Huey in 1908 and led to "Dick and Jane". The UK version was Professor (Sir) Fred Schonell's "The Psychology and Teaching of Reading" which was the students' 'bible' for 30 years 1945 – 1975. He never said that phonics did not work! But he said "phonics was deadly drill, dull as dishwater", and no student would want to be that dull! If you look at the word-shapes he offers, no way can you read the words from them. Try it!

Schonell's whole theory is disproved in ten seconds, yet somehow he conned the profession into accepting the dangerous nonsense. Testing over the years showed appalling failure rates. I reckon that Britain's national average in reading after one, two or three years at school is at least a year below potential, and has been for 30 or 40 years, but the 'professionals' carried on regardless.

The Warnock Report led teachers to accept a 20% failure rate as normal and to be expected. From 1970 Frank Smith (Canada) urged "Use your eyes as little as possible" and if a pupil read "horse" for the text-word 'pony', that was just fine. Professor Kenneth Goodman (Arizona) made it even worse with his definition, "Reading is a psycholinguist guessing game". For 25 years, Betty Root directed the Reading Reading Centre, and failed to alert the thousands of teachers who visited it to the flaws in the received wisdom on teaching reading. Now retired, she has put together a little 99p book sold by TESCO entitled "Phonics". On page 3 you will find, "big sad clean dry dirty". Along with "box", she presents "cow", where the 'o' does not sound as in 'box'.

Three of the four strategies of the National Literacy Strategy, 1998, are guessing:- from the picture, context or initial letter. Far from being a useful 'strategy', guessing is very dangerous, a bad habit, and some children simply cannot begin to learn to read until they STOP guessing. Even the phonics in the NLS is disorganised and very

slow. Each year the wrong advice is repeated as government churns out programme after programme: PiPs, ELS, ALS, FLS – just more of the same – because it comes from the same ‘experts’.

When the National Literacy Strategy first came out, every teacher, headteacher, English adviser, lecturer, LEA official, the BDA, UKRA, NATE ought to have rejected it with bitter laughter and disgust, but this did not happen. Instead the LEAs appointed an officer to ensure that the NLS was being used in schools. I told John Stannard, even before it was printed, that it would not work, but he took no notice. Now, five years later, Ofsted reports that the NLS has failed to deliver the ‘dramatic improvements’ expected, and which is indeed possible, and being achieved by teachers using Jolly Phonics properly, or the Clackmannan way, or the St Michael’s, Stoke Gifford way, or the American Phono-Graphix way, or my way. I have tried to tell Gordon Brown that he could save £billions by withdrawing the government advice and letting schools use commercial schemes like Jolly Phonics in the way the authors advise. But my letter was passed on to...The DfES. I tried to tell Margaret Hodge – the same. I tried to write to Charles Clarke (and Estelle Morris before him) by writing to Clarke’s Norwich constituency office, but always the letter ended up on one single desk in the DfES. The whole system is geared to one single school of thought, working on the basis that they cannot be wrong. The system is tightly sewn up at every level, every nook and cranny, to fend off all the warnings or suggestions. You can’t tell ‘em; they won’t listen.

I have tried both the local and national Ombudsman, but they say their brief does not cover how children are taught to read.

We all need to know what has gone on for over half a century. Parents, teachers themselves whose training has let them down so badly, governors, councillors, MPs, employers, taxpayers, even victims of crime; half the children in juvenile court are ‘dyslexic’. Parents can see the misery of lost confidence, frustration, humiliation, that ends up with truancy, and children enduring 12 years of school-prison only to leave at the end virtually unemployable. The National Governors’ Council invited me to join their website. I did, and in no time someone complained and I was ‘struck off’.

After 20 years of being fended off when I offered to help in Norfolk, moving to the north-west for family reasons I specifically chose Knowsley as being the bottom of the league tables. I KNEW I could help. Naively, I thought somebody there would be looking for ways to improve. Not so. I met just the same brick wall as in Norfolk. I wrote to the chairman of the education committee, Councillor Nolan, who replied that he lacked the expertise and the training to take up the matter of teaching method – and in the last 8 years he is determined to remain in blissful ignorance. I had a meeting with the then Director, Peter Wylie, and the then English adviser, Ann Tregenza. But Ms Tregenza ‘believes in’ Whole Language, and condoned the neglect of phonics while she worked there. Both Mr Wylie and Ms Tregenza have now left. Three local councillors approached Peter Wylie, but told me “he would not budge an inch.”

I have approached half a dozen Knowsley schools offering to discuss with them the teaching of phonics and get no welcome. Just one school listened. In my first visit, I offered to teach “the two worst readers in the school” and two names were given in seconds! I got them going then they left to go elsewhere. However, I sat in with Year 1 for a full year and at the year-end the results were so good that the BBC made a film “Just One Chance” (1998) – but this generated not one single enquiry from any teacher! It was the same as Radio 4 “Odds Against” half-hour back in 1989. This lack of professional curiosity worries me. During one outburst of the reading war, Sue Palmer ran a campaign called “Balance”, so that if phonics came back, we would still keep the guessing, sight words etc. The Bullock Report 1974-5 was very influential, but it, too, insisted on “There is no one way to teach reading”. In all its 600 pages, the best bit is the 4-page Note of Dissent by Stuart Frome, “You can’t fool all the people all the time.”

The year the National Literacy Strategy came in, I taught the reception class its Literacy Hour from September to Easter (when I had to stop through an injury). Nevertheless, at year-end not a single child had a reading age below chronological age and the average was a good nine months ahead in reading. But such is the clout of the NLS that, unless I was actually doing the teaching, the school changed back to the NLS, and results dropped back to the usual failure rate. This was in a school that had seen my way work twice! Why does the LEA not want such good results in all its schools? Why does it take pride in being excellent “considering” the socio-economic environment?

We now have a new Director, Steve Munby. He says that he will support any work I do, but I have to approach individual schools. He will not invite teachers to a seminar to work with me. But when I write to, say, Halsnead, all the teachers have had the usual mistraining, they got the same message from Ann Tregenza, then the same message from the National Literacy Strategy, from the UK Reading Association, from the National Association for Teachers of English, and when they kept to the NLS, Ofsted praised them to the skies; “Excellent, no improvements to offer, no areas of weakness” – yet the school had 83 children with special needs, 21% of its roll! I offered help, but did not even get a reply. Yet Ofsted had said, “Excellent – compared to similar schools”. My aim was to be ‘excellent compared to ANY school’ – right up to Richmond on Thames.

The DfES convened a phonics seminar in March 2003 and the chairman, Professor David Hopkins of Nottingham University, “sees no grounds for radical changes to the strategy”. Damian Green (then Shadow Education Secretary) rightly suggests that the government throw the NLS away and start again! By closing down the Literacy Centre and vast pruning of the staff at the DfES, the government could save £billions and we would have a better education.

This problem is impairing education throughout the English-speaking world except (until recently) South Africa. In Australia Chris Nugent, Byron Harrison, Valerie Yule, Brian Byrne and a Queensland group fight for phonics-first. In New Zealand, Tom Nicholson, James Chapman, William Turner and others strive for phonics, but valid reports are ‘dismissed’ by the politicians. In Canada, the Organisation for Quality Education, Stanovich, and people in British Columbia and elsewhere battle against Whole Language. In America, Barbara Foorman (Texas), Barbara Bateman (Oregon), John Stone (Tennessee), Ann Mactier (Nebraska), Charles Richardson (Long Island), Patrick Groff (California), the McGuinnesses (Florida) and many others are working to bring back good phonics, and meeting the same brick wall.

We cannot afford more decades of ineffective schools. What do we do when the experts are wrong, badly wrong, and united, on such a simple matter? Why do secondary schools not complain about their illiterate intake? Student teachers are badly let down right from the start. Why do teachers (the first victims) not sue their trainers for giving them such a bum steer in teaching reading? Considering the cost we pay year after year, in both money and human misery, there simply HAS TO BE a way to blow the whistle, in a TV Watchdog programme, or a sustained campaign from reputable journalists, to show how badly wrong the fashionable, “modern”, “creative” ideas have been in teaching reading, and how a return to the simple, cheap, long-proved phonics and common sense would provide the essential foundation for all academic learning.

Teaching reading by phonics first, fast and foremost is “The rising tide that lifts all ships” and nothing else will do the job.

Editor’s comment: No-one can deny that Mona McNee is a remarkable lady, dedicated to turning the tide of how reading gets taught in our schools. No doubt many people featuring in Mona’s journey haven’t quite known what to make of a lady with such passion and conviction, but many more have understood what she was saying. Many have had their children’s reading abilities radically improved by Mona teaching or tutoring them with her evidence-based knowledge and skills.

Mona edited the first 44 RRF newsletters and when I took over as editor, I was privileged to inherit a wealth of historic literature, enabling me to build on Mona’s accumulated knowledge of the history of reading instruction, and a bank of contacts across the English-speaking world as mentioned in her article above. I cannot thank Mona enough for her support and the information and contacts she has afforded me which have helped me enormously in the understanding of the reading debate and in my editorship of the RRF newsletter.

Both Mona and I have our critics. We have outspoken ways and sometimes our passion, founded in sheer concern for the children whom we view as needlessly betrayed, gets the better of us both. ‘Needless’, because it does not have to be this way, ‘betrayed’ because the right information is out there.

However, whatever our style in attempting to spread information and implement change, only one fundamental question needs to be asked and answered: Are we, and so many others, expressing fact or opinion?

Raising standards

The opportunities and difficulties

Keynote speech by Christopher Jolly, Managing Director of Jolly Learning Ltd
British Council conference, Brunei, Thursday 9th October 2003

Abstract

Raising standards is what everyone wants, is it not? In practice it is not so simple. Experts have different views about what 'raising standards' means. Creativity and expression may be thought to conflict with learning skills and facts. There is a need to balance the limitations of time, and more especially of money. We need to ask who should drive the raising of standards? Should it be government through a specified curriculum, or to what extent should teachers be informed and given the decision making – and then be evaluated on their results? What role for private education and the market place? Chris Jolly will explore these conflicting issues in raising standards. He will also look at it in more depth in his own field of publishing, the use of phonics to teach reading and writing, where differences of view have long been played out.

What I want to discuss today is how raising standards is an opportunity, a challenge, but how there are difficulties at the same time. I want to show the different points of view because it is only through understanding that we can make progress. Firstly, what are higher standards? I suggest to you that they come in two forms, both of which are valid. There are those that are quantitative and can be readily measured. These tend to involve instruction, best of all in small stages, with skills that are acquired and can be tested. An ability to spell would be an example. The second, the qualitative, is more subjective and harder to measure. It develops thinking ability and allows for personal differences. An example might be the ability to write a good essay. There was a somewhat chauvinistic claim that the Second World War was won on the playing fields of Eton, a posh private school in England. What was actually being claimed was that the English education system gave better problem solving ability, with which to challenge the Germans well-known but perhaps rigid skills. On a lighter note there is the proverb that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy". Again a reflection that education needs these two sides. By extension, teaching needs a balance of both of these. It needs the quantitative and the qualitative elements.

Now to some people, raising standards in education is simply a matter of resources. The more money we have the more teachers we can train, the smaller the class sizes, the more we can do for special needs, and so on. I have to tell you that the effect of more resources is not a strong one. Many a benefactor in the US has given vast sums to school districts only to find, after the money has been spent, that it has had little or no effect on standards. Resources alone cannot double the achievement of children in the way other changes can. In the UK and the US, both wealthy countries, still around a fifth to a quarter of adults are functionally illiterate. In a recent study in the UK this applied to 22% of adults, and was defined as being unable to find a plumber in the yellow pages. In 1992 in New Zealand, at the height of the whole language movement, 26% of children were going through Reading Recovery, a remedial programme.

Let me turn now to the role of the state, of government. To what extent should government intervene to raise standards, or are standards likely to improve best if responsibility is delegated to teachers and parents?

Let's look first at school ownership. In most countries there is a large sector of state education, and a smaller private one. Private schools will select their pupils, based on exam results and their parents' ability to pay the fees. In practice, state schools select too, usually by a tightly defined catchment area around the school. The complaint is that private schools favour the middle class who can pay. It is claimed they take away the better pupils and leave the state schools worse off as a result. If this were true it would be the only case I am aware of where greater competition leads to lower standards. The evidence shows the reverse. Where there are more private schools in an area, the results for pupils in the state schools are higher. To try and introduce the same disciplines to state schools there is a growing interest in vouchers. These are already in use in certain parts of the US, such as Cleveland, Milwaukee and Florida. The vouchers are typically given to poorer parents, and can be used to pay for education at any school, private or out of area, whatever the parent chooses. The aim is to give parents more power over their child's education and encourage schools to improve their standards as a result of more open competition.

A superficial comparison of costs shows private school fees to be higher on average than the on-site costs of state schools. However when the costs of district offices are included for state schools, the costs are much closer. Private schools have long suffered from being seen as elitist in the UK, or for exploiting teachers in the US, and the number of private schools has not expanded in line with demand. This may well have allowed private school fees to run ahead of costs, and explain the large building programmes some of them have. The net effect is that the costs of state and private schooling are very similar, and do not explain the difference in achievement.

Over the years of primary schooling, the average result achieved by private school pupils is more than 12 months ahead of state schools, even allowing for the different intakes. It suggests that school ownership and funding are a promising area for raising standards.

Let us now look at the role of the state in setting the curriculum and the structure of examinations. Government is ideally placed to provide a well structured framework and to set a standard for all schools. However, even here, we can question whether this enables the highest standards to be achieved.

While having an established curriculum seems a good idea, problems come when there are several of them. A curriculum can be radically rewritten, as with the UK National Curriculum in 1994, when there had been major criticisms of the previous one. Any such revision still needs evaluating for its effectiveness.

Worse still is when government suffers from curriculumitis and publishes new curricula when the old one is still in operation so that several conflicting ones are in operation at the same time! This may seem a very odd situation but it is the one that applies in England and Wales at the moment. Children in their first year at school, in Reception, are subject to the National Curriculum, the National Literacy Strategy which is similar but different, and the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, which is quite different: it is a muddle in other words.

More serious for raising standards is whether the expectations of the state can match those of parents. We know that expectations can have a strong influence on achievement. In a study some years ago, researchers asked teachers in various schools to administer some standardised tests to their pupils. When they got the test results back the researchers totally ignored them. Instead they selected children's names at random. Then they went back into the classes and told the teachers that this child, this one, this, that and that child there, are what we call "specially talented", and they will do really well. Much later on, they came back to test the children, and lo and behold, these 'specially talented' children, chosen at random, had done better than average!

The concern with government setting the curriculum is that their expectations are lower than the expectations of parents. To give an example, three and a half year olds at a private nursery school in the UK are expected to be taught to read. In state schools, for children a year later at aged four and a half, according to the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, the teaching of reading is not a high priority. This suggests that any national curricula should be advisory at best.

A related issue is that of the dumbing down of exams. Secondary school exams in the UK have been made easier over the years. The accusation is that this has been done so that pupils achieve higher grades to make it appear that standards are rising. As a result there has been a growing interest in exams with international status, free from government interference, such as the International Baccalaureate, and the same could apply to the Cambridge Overseas exams.

What now of the role of the teacher. Is the teacher there to give instruction, or is the teacher just a facilitator, letting children discover for themselves? Time and again we find that direct instruction produces much higher results, yet it is surprising how often government and academics seek to diminish this role. Again, how much decision making should be delegated to teachers? In the US it is surprising how much authority is taken from teachers. The selection of a new programme, for maths say, or literacy, is entrusted to the assistant superintendent of the district, sometimes of the state. If it doesn't work it is not the teacher's fault. The assistant superintendent chose the wrong programme. Publishers respond by making their programmes prescriptive, and have described them by the awful term of 'teacher proof'. The results do not suggest this is a way to raise standards. In my experience, with our published material, the more that the teacher personalises the way they use our material the better the results they get. Delegation to teachers really does raise standards.

As a further insight, let me show you this list of factors which might tell you how well a child will learn to read:

Phoneme segmentation ability (eg. What sound is at the beginning of "smile"?)

Letter names

Kindergarten teacher's prediction of reading success

Peabody Picture Vocabulary (a measure of oral vocabulary)

Father's occupational status (as a measure of social class)

Library membership (ie. Whether the child already has a library card)

Number of books the child owns

Amount that parents read to their child

Child's gender

Amount that parents read in their spare time

Whether or not the child attended pre-school

Hours of TV the child watches

Could you select the two factors that you think would best predict a child's future ability to learn to read when they start school? Let me tell you that this was a study done on 500 Australian children. Common choices when I ask people have been the father's occupation and the amount that parents read to their child.

Would it surprise you to know that the answer is that these factors are in rank order? Not only that, but the first two were much the best predictors. Knowing the letters and their use in words is the best start to learning to read. And these are factors that are taught at school. It is one example to show that what children learn at school matters much more than the background from which they come.

I am the publisher of a programme for teaching young children to read, called Jolly Phonics. So I am biased in favour of phonics! Having said that, let me give you a comparison of phonics and whole language.

Phonics teaches all the letter sounds of English, of which there are about 44. These are the alphabet and some sounds like sh and ee that need two letters to be written, and so are called digraphs. To read a word the child sounds out the letter sounds and then blends them to say the word. So the letters s-a-t are blended to make 'sat'. For spelling it is the reverse. The word 'sat' is broken into 'sss' and 'a' and 't', and each of these letters is then written down. Since English has so many irregular words you also need a strategy for dealing with them too. This teaching is also called synthetic phonics to distinguish it from watered down versions. Synthesis means to build from parts, and in this case reading the word is made by building it from each of its letter sounds.

Whole language on the other hand believes that learning to read is a natural process, just like learning to speak. It comes from exposure. In practice of course it does not! If you went into the middle of Borneo you would find that everyone could speak but few could read. Whole language, they say, introduces children to the delight and variety of storybooks. If children are motivated and given lots of exposure to books they will pick it up. Effectively whole language children are being asked to memorise the dictionary!

To help understand the differences in approach look at how each method sees itself. Phonics advocates rightly point to higher achievements and see whole language advocates as totally misguided. Whole language advocates on the other hand see phonics as dull and boring, to be done as little as possible. Admittedly some phonics programmes are on the dry side. Phonics, they say, misses the point that children should be reading for meaning, not just shouting out words they do not understand.

In practice there is a dramatic difference in achievement. Phonics taught children have a reading age that is typically a year ahead of their actual age after one year. They have done two years learning in one year. Every bit as important is that fewer children fail. The proportion of children reading significantly below their age is less than 5%. In fact it is common to have no children in such a class needing remedial help. Interestingly the groups of children who have historically underachieved no longer do so. Boys do as well as girls and children on free school meals or some form of welfare, as a measure of social class, do as well as the others. Children with English as a second language also do much the same as the others. This evidence for the effect of phonics comes from studies done on a number of different phonics programmes, though it is true that most of them have been on Jolly Phonics.

Whole language children do very much worse and the love of reading that is claimed is not seen in practice. It is a characteristic of such teaching that a quarter of the children are left unable to read effectively. The only help for such children is an expensive remedial programme which is usually not given the funding to tackle more than a small part of the problem.

This conflict in the teaching of reading has only come into the open in the last 30 years or so. Up to around 1970 reading was mainly taught by teaching the alphabet alongside graded readers with stories of "the cat sat on the mat" variety. Spelling was mainly taught by memorisation from spelling lists.

Then people started saying that you do not need to do all that. Reading is natural and can be learned just by reading. Phonics was rejected and teachers were given the freedom to select any children's books they fancied. It was some while before the tragedy of this became apparent. The people to blow the whistle, in very different ways, were Martin Turner in the UK, and Marilyn Jager Adams in the US. Martin Turner was then an educational psychologist working for a local education authority in the UK. He could see the problem at first hand. He also knew how explosive it was. He met with educational

psychologists from 12 other areas and compared data. What they saw was that reading standards in the UK had fallen over the course of the 1980s. Their data indicated that this was directly due to the whole language method of teaching reading. Martin Turner published this as a booklet called ‘Sponsored Reading Failure’. Sponsored, because he and his colleagues felt the failure had been sponsored by the state in championing whole language. It caused a huge uproar in the press. Martin himself was surprised that even though there was the first Iraq war in progress at the time, the reading debate never seemed to be off the front page. It led to a parliamentary inquiry and ultimately to the revision of the National Curriculum. Needless to say he also lost his job pretty quickly.

Marilyn Jager Adams wrote a definitive book on the research into reading. Despite coming to it with an open mind she found the evidence in favour of phonics was overwhelming. The brief from the publishing university was to be impartial and when they saw her script two professors demanded the right to add an Afterword to her book. We often see books with a complimentary forward, but this is the only example I know of with a critical afterword. They didn’t question her scholarship, they said, only her conclusions. This is a reflection of the deep divisions that have existed in the reading debate.

In England the National Curriculum was rewritten in 1994 and I will show you a brief comparison to illustrate the difference. The teaching of reading was a major part of the UK general election in 1997. It led to the National Literacy Strategy being published the following year. It was led until recently by our previous speaker, John Stannard. Teachers appreciate this Literacy Strategy and they like the structure it provides. More recently, in 2000, we have had the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, which has been a reaction against structured teaching. It shows that you can go backwards as well as forwards in this debate. As I explained earlier, all three of these curricula are in operation in England and Wales at the moment, for children in their first year at school.

As a final example there is the legislation passed by George Bush in the US entitled ‘No Child Left Behind’. Although I am not in favour of legislation in teaching methodology, the advice given, in my view, is good, and I will mention it again shortly.

Let me demonstrate the kind of advice given in these documents. In the earlier, 1990 order of the National Curriculum was the requirement that:

“Pupils should be able to show signs of a developing interest in reading”. Well, that is not very demanding! Any teacher could pass that hurdle, and parents would be looking for much more from their child at the end of the first year. In 1994 this was revised to the much more positive:

“Opportunities should be given for identifying and using a comprehensive range of letters, blends and digraphs, and paying specific attention to their use in the formation of words.”

You can see the difference. This second statement does express what is needed to achieve good results in the early teaching of reading. Moreover, if you trace the results of 5 year old children in the years up to 1994 you can see a major improvement in their reading scores at age 11. The National Literacy Strategy is similar to the National Curriculum, but the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage is very different. This is from its training manual:

“You can help children to learn numbers and rhymes or to recite the alphabet by heart. This rote learning can be helpful to children but it should be recognised as a lower level of learning. The most important learning involves children having an idea and testing it out.”

So here we are back at the child as discoverer with direct instruction being played down. You will notice the slightly underhand use of language. Instead of learning letter sounds in a lively way, which is

commonly done, it is described as ‘to recite the alphabet by heart’, which is described as ‘rote learning’ and a ‘lower level of learning’. Who dreamed that up? A lower level of learning! There is no evidence for such a statement. It has to be said that since this guidance came out in the year 2000 reading scores have stagnated in England and Wales with 25% of 11 year olds failing to read effectively. This curriculum advice does not apply at that age, but my view is that the advice given sets the tone as the government’s most recent advice on the teaching of reading. As I mentioned before, if there is a reading war, it is never won. You have to keep fighting the advice that would let standards fall.

I mentioned the legislation in the US. This simply requires schools to adopt ‘scientifically based’ ways to teach reading. This is mature. It puts the requirement on teachers and schools. It does not spoon feed them, but tells them to use methods which are known to work. It has been taken as a victory for phonics and it should significantly raise standards.

Now you will remember that I made a case to you for the quantitative and qualitative sides of teaching, the skills and the creative. But you will have seen that phonics is very skills based. So where does the creative come in? Let me give you this model which guides my company. We see phonics as the foundation, and yes it is the development of skills. We then see literacy as having two strands, a skills one which is about phonics and grammar and spelling, and a creative one, which is about storybooks. Let me give you a Confucian proverb, if I may. It is this. If a person have two pennies with one let him buy bread and with the other a flower. The bread to give life and the flower a reason for living. Phonics and grammar are like bread; they give the ability. Storybooks are like the flower; they give the reason for learning to read. The conclusion I offer you is that we need both the quantitative and the qualitative elements in education, and some understanding of how best to integrate them to get the best results.

To finish, let me ask you a question? Can standards keep on rising, or are we in a static situation, just trying to keep them as high as we can? Economic productivity keeps on rising. Can it do the same in education? If educational productivity is to keep on rising, as I believe it can and must, then change needs to take place. Let me give you an example of such a change that I believe can and should come. Not today, not tomorrow, but probably this century.

Here is a list of English words which are spelt with more letters than they need. Indeed the extra letter in them is just confusing for young children learning to read:

| | | |
|---------|-------|--------------|
| friend | frend | as in trend |
| guard | gard | as in hard |
| were | wer | as in her |
| wrong | rong | as in long |
| lamb | lam | as in ham |
| guest | gest | as in best |
| guide | gide | as in ride |
| height | hight | as in light |
| court | cort | as in fort |
| are | ar | as in car |
| gone | gon | as in on |
| shone | shon | as in on |
| knock | nock | as in sock |
| doubt | dout | as in out |
| drought | drout | as in trout |
| juice | juce | as in spruce |
| switch | swich | as in rich |

| | | |
|--------|-------|-------------|
| thumb | thum | as in sum |
| thread | thred | as in red |
| head | hed | as in red |
| meant | ment | as in tent |
| earth | erth | as in berth |
| more | mor | as in for |
| board | bord | as in cord |

Normally the 'ie' spelling in the word 'friend' would be sounded /ie/ as in 'lie and 'tie'. But the word is not 'frie-nd'. To spell it that way confuses children and means they have to learn it specially. There are huge numbers of such words which just make the teaching slower, as well as making words longer, unnecessarily, for adults.

If spelling were reformed, and it should go much further than these examples, then learning to read would be much swifter. So the conclusion I offer you, from this example, is that standards could indeed continue to rise, but it may involve society as a whole, to enable the teacher to achieve more.

Editor's comment: Chris Jolly touches upon many interesting and important aspects of education and offers much food for thought. I consider Chris to be visionary. Being a teacher of young children myself, I can say that to teach reading and writing with a much simpler spelling system would indeed make an enormous difference for children across the world who are struggling to learn the English language. The benefits of this vision would be so great that a brief comment here cannot begin to do justice to the potential transformation for so many in educational terms and life chances.

However, the RRF must focus on getting good evidence-based teaching of English into our schools as the spelling system currently exists. I have tried to play my part in this challenge. To the best of my ability, I have endeavoured to cover as many angles of the reading debate as I could, frequently focusing on the English scene - such are the worries about the reading instruction advice of the National Literacy Strategy. The way to raise literacy levels urgently and significantly in this country lies in the hands of those afforded the clout and the authority. Who in the educational and political domain will do it?

...and the last word is on the NLS managers' claim that issues of improvement are to do with the implementation, not the design, of the National Literacy Strategy...and clear signs from Hopkins and Brooks that any future changes will still leave the NLS as a 'mix of methods', not a synthetic phonics approach...

Extract from the NLS seminar paper 'Teaching phonics in the National Literacy Strategy' (2003): "It is the contention of this paper that the design of the NLS is broadly correct and that the issues of improvement are more to do with its implementation than its design." [p. 1]

"However, even where the NLS or another phonics programme is in place, too many teachers under-emphasise the application of phonics in the teaching of continuous reading. This has two important consequences. Firstly, it fails to consolidate and practise phonics learning; secondly it tends to teach children to be over-reliant on non-phonetic strategies. This inhibits fluency and thus progress. This is a significant issue for the NLS. As well as the weaknesses in the direct teaching of phonics, a number of teachers have failed to grasp the importance of applying it effectively in shared and guided reading. There is a tendency for some teachers to direct children away from the phonics searchlight in the first instance and only to use it as a last resort." [p. 14]

Hepplewhite says, "Such a claim and such blaming the teachers defy belief." The tendency of teachers to teach as described above in the NLS paper is a direct consequence of the NLS training and programmes. The RRF has drawn attention to numerous examples of flawed training and advice through its newsletters and correspondence. For instance:- the reading text example on the Progression in Phonics CD Rom shows a girl attempt to sound out 's-o-f-t' but the adult says 'What

would make sense?’ and does not reinforce nor require the blending process (synthesising). The infamous ‘Go-Karts’ ELS training video for guided reading in a reception class is entirely a whole language approach with no blending to be seen. In the Early Literacy Support training manual for Y1 teachers and teaching assistants it gives the following (typical) instructions for teaching children to read; “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?” Does this rigmarole bear any resemblance to the promotion and application of synthetic phonics teaching for reading text? These instructions for teachers and assistants correspond with half way through Year 1 – the children have not yet been told to sound out and blend all-through-the-word for reading at this point in the Early Literacy Support programme. Instead teachers are told to use the guessing range of reading strategies (which are frequently associated with the searchlights model) and children are expected to remember whole words for reading and spelling by sight recognition. If teachers are not emphasising “the application of phonics in the teaching of continuous reading”, then it is highly likely that the NLS itself has led to such a consequence. This is a significant issue for the RRF.

Extract from Professor Brooks’s report of the DfES phonics seminar: *“Though I know of no experimental evidence of the question, I support the teaching of a small initial sight vocabulary.”*

Extracts from Professor Ehri’s paper for the DfES phonics seminar: *“People used to think that readers learned to read sight words by memorising words by their visual shapes. However, research has led us to reject this idea. Now we know that sight word learning depends upon the application of grapheme-phoneme correspondences.” [p.1]*

“...when phonics instruction is introduced after students have already acquired some reading skill, it may be more difficult to step in and influence how they read, because it requires changing students’ habits....students may need to suppress the habit of guessing words based on context and minimal letter clues...” [p.8]

According to Professor Brooks and Professor Hopkins, learning words as an initial sight vocabulary continues to be recommended (though Brooks says he knows “of no experimental evidence” to support this) and according to the Professors, the DfES and the NLS managers, a range of reading strategies (variously described in different NLS programmes but which clearly promote the “habit of guessing” warned about in research conclusions) continues to be recommended for the teaching of reading.

So...the teaching of reading remains a contentious issue, but a most worrying factor is the continuing denial and whitewash of what the NLS programmes and training ACTUALLY promote compared to the advice that the NLS managers believe, or say, that they promote. Who will address this?

The RRF continues to maintain that the research on reading instruction points to the need for Synthetic Phonics teaching, and the NLS continues to claim it is “a synthetic phonics programme”. In reality the NLS promotes something quite different....

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