

## Teach phonemic awareness with letters

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## EDITORIAL

As I take over the editorship of the newsletter my expressions of thanks to my two predecessors, Mona McNee and Debbie Hepplewhite, are more than a formality. Mona started the newsletter in 1989 and kept it going almost single-handed until 2001. Debbie then took over, gave it a new look, and persuaded more people than before to contribute. Unfortunately, there came a point at which she could no longer combine the editing with her very arduous 'day-job', although she is continuing to deal with some aspects of production and distribution for which I am most grateful. She and Mona deserve great credit for giving us a publication which goes down well at the grass-roots level but is also increasingly making an impact at higher levels – sometimes as an irritant, because of the way that it challenges official thinking, but sometimes as a source of valuable information.

A key part of the Newsletter's function, as I see it, is to go on trying to bridge the gap between reputable research findings and classroom practice. In putting each Newsletter on the RRF website as soon as it is published so that people all over the world have access to it without charge, we are doing something which is unusual for publications of this sort. I believe, however, that this policy is right in view of the importance of getting good phonics teaching back into classrooms throughout the English-speaking world.

In this issue, Chris Jolly's article refers to the fact that there is more research support for synthetic phonics than for the type of approach embodied in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). Marlynne Grant's article deals with the research which she has carried out over a six-year period at St Michael's School, Stoke Gifford. Her findings mesh in well with the five-year Clackmannanshire study, some details of which are available on the RRF website. In both cases, the beneficial effects of an initial burst of good synthetic phonics teaching in the first year of school are still evident several years later, with levels of reading and spelling well above national averages and boys doing at least as well as girls. These findings were referred to by Lord Quirk in a recent debate in the House of Lords (see page 16). Lord Quirk is a top international authority on the English language and it is good to have him supporting phonics. The 'Dead Horse Syndrome' piece is not specifically about research or the practicalities of teaching reading, but Newsletter readers will no doubt find it relevant as well as amusing. Sue Lloyd's 'Learning to read and write: fashion or fact' article touches on similar points: too many of the horses which the NLS is attempting to flog into action are in fact dead. This issue ends with Debbie Hepplewhite's article on the confused relationship between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1.

Years ago, someone who had made a significant contribution to the reading debate told me that he felt rather as he had done when he used to play rugby at school: out of a welter of flying boots and mud, he would see the ball, grab it, and make as much ground as possible with it. In the RRF, we are conscious of the flying mud and boots, but we all try to contribute to the team effort by running with the ball when we can. We *are* making progress, and can only hope that someone will emerge, whether or not from our ranks, and score that drop-goal which finally clinches victory for research and common sense in the teaching of reading to beginners!

Jennifer Chew.

# It's as easy as 'sh', 'th', 'ng'

Christopher Jolly

(This article is a slightly edited version of one first published in *The Daily Telegraph* on 11 February 2004)

David Bell, the head of Ofsted, said last week that primary schools were spending so much time teaching literacy and numeracy that they were failing to give their pupils a rounded education. And yet, he added, the national literacy strategy appeared to have stalled, leaving one pupil in four unable to read and write properly.

So how has the literacy strategy – supposedly one of the jewels in the Department for Education's crown – resulted in a double failure across the primary curriculum? The simple answer is that it is blind to what works. It has tried to achieve its aims by bluster and prescription instead of by research and understanding.

Failure to teach reading is not a new problem. A recent report from the Basic Skills Unit showed that just over a fifth of adults are functionally illiterate. But it need not be so, for the failure is very largely the result of the way reading is taught.

The national literacy strategy repeatedly uses the expression "to read on sight". But reading on sight – memorising how words look – results in a high level of failure. The alternative, which is infinitely more successful, is to learn to read words by the sounds of their letters.

Learning to read this way is called phonics (or synthetic phonics). It has two main elements, both of which are relatively straightforward. First, the child needs to be taught each of the letter sounds. The alphabet is not enough as there are about 44 sounds in English. Some of them, such as "sh" and "ee", are represented by two letters, called digraphs when they function in this way. By the time you include "th", "ng" and "oo", there are quite a few digraphs, each of them representing a single sound.

The alphabet is not enough for another reason, too: it calls each letter by its name, when what the child needs is the letter's sound.

The other element the child needs is to learn how to "blend" the sounds together to read words. Just making the sounds b-u-s run together to make the word "bus" is quite an achievement for young children. But they can be quick to learn and, with practice, they will become good at it.

A child who knows the letter sounds and can blend is able to read new words that he or she has never seen before. By contrast, a child taught to "read on sight" will know only the words taught so far. Faced with new words – even a simple one such as "hat" – the child is likely to say that he or she has not done that one yet.

The difference in the achievement of those taught by each method is stark. At the end of their first year at school, children taught with phonics in the way I have described typically have a reading age 12 months ahead of those taught to memorise words by sight. More importantly, their failure rate is far lower. Children whose teaching is based on sight vocabulary have a one in four chance of failing, with boys much more likely to fail than girls. With phonics, less than one in 20 has this risk, and boys do as well as girls.

All this is well known and has been confirmed by one published study after another. The best start for children is to learn all the letter sounds as soon as they start school. Commercial phonics schemes are available that ensure this happens in the first term, and they are widely used by teachers. Sadly, the national literacy strategy recommends taking two and a half years to learn letter sounds.

Yet reading with half the letter sounds is like trying to play cards with half a pack. It is the same with blending. Many published schemes make the blending of sounds central to their programme, but in the national literacy strategy, the word “blending” does not appear at all in the first year.

The failure to understand lies with the Government and the authors of the national literacy strategy, not with teachers. A study my company commissions each year shows that the majority of primary school teachers think “learning letter sounds and blending” is more effective than “learning the alphabet and using context and meaning”.

So we need a way out of this dilemma. We need the teaching of reading to be based on the use of phonics – which requires no extra time from other subjects in the curriculum – rather than on the advice of the national literacy strategy. To an extent, it is already beginning to happen. Fewer teachers now use the national literacy strategy, and more of them are using commercial phonics schemes.

Decisions about teaching methods should be made by teachers, not by ministers. The Government and Ofsted should limit themselves to setting objectives and measuring results. The best guidance on teaching methods comes from teachers who achieve excellent results with children of all abilities – something the teacher training institutions ought to remember.

We need to do a lot more to reduce a level of failure that has been with us for too long.

Christopher Jolly is Managing Director of Jolly Learning Limited.

Editor’s comment: The phrase ‘reading words on sight’ can, as some researchers have pointed out, have two rather different meanings: reading words by their general shape, without detailed attention to the letters, and reading words which have been read so often by detailed attention to the letters that they are familiar and any detailed processing is now subconscious. When the NLS was introduced, most teachers were so used to the first of these meanings that it was inevitable that they would treat the lists headed ‘High frequency words to be taught as “sight recognition” words’ in this way and not as words to be processed by letter-sound decoding.

# The Dead Horse Syndrome

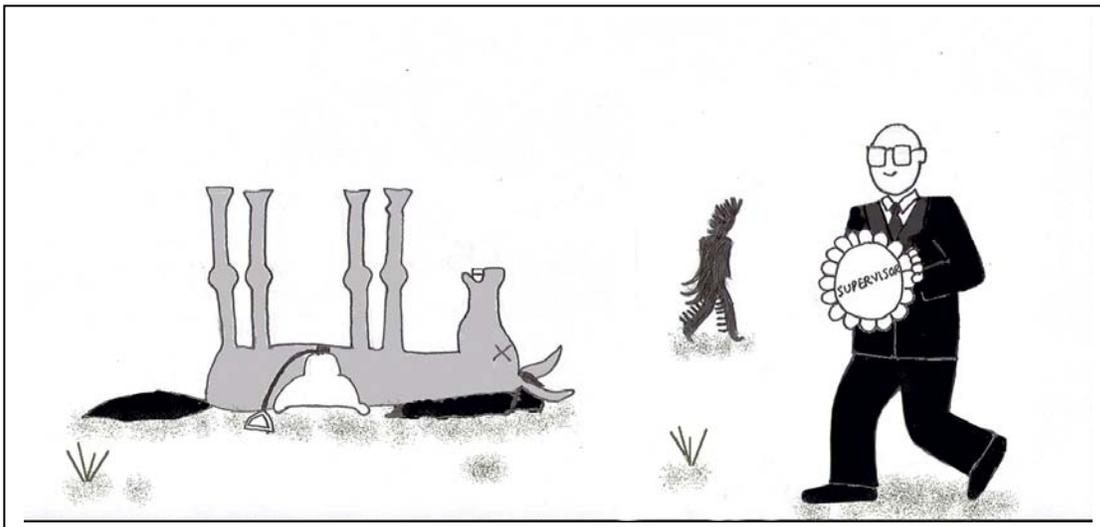
(This amusing piece was circulated on the internet. Efforts to track down its origins have been unsuccessful.)

The tribal wisdom of the Dakota Indians, passed on from generation to generation, says that ‘When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount’.

However, in government, education, and in corporate America, more advanced strategies are often employed, such as:

1. Buying a stronger whip.
2. Changing riders.
3. Appointing a committee to study the horse.
4. Arranging to visit other countries to see how other cultures ride horses.
5. Lowering the standards so that dead horses can be included.
6. Reclassifying the horse as living-impaired.
7. Hiring outside contractors to ride the dead horse.
8. Harnessing several dead horses together to increase speed.
9. Providing additional funding and/or training to increase the dead horse’s performance.
10. Doing a productivity study to see if lighter riders would improve the dead horse’s performance.
11. Declaring that the dead horse does not have to be fed, it is less costly, carries lower overheads, and contributes substantially more to the bottom line of the economy than do some other horses.
12. Rewriting the performance requirements for all horses.

And of course a favourite .... promoting the dead horse to a supervisory position.



# **Raising literacy attainments of all pupils in a mainstream primary setting with particular reference to boys' writing – a six-year longitudinal study**

**Marlynn Grant**

## **Summary**

Nationally boys fall behind girls in early literacy skills and this gap widens with age ([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/)). A longitudinal study at a large mainstream primary school with low entry assessments has shown that this need not be the case. The first cohort of children who started with synthetic phonics in Reception took their Key Stage 2 SATs in summer 2003. Level 5 boys' writing was found to be 33.3% compared with the figure of 9.5% for the Local Education Authority and 11% nationally. Statistically this is a highly significant difference.

## **Introduction**

Six years ago, the author and the Special Educational Needs (SEN) co-ordinator at a mainstream primary school started to collaborate on developing a system of teaching which aimed to improve literacy standards for all pupils. A synthetic phonics programme was developed (Sound Discovery®) which differed in its phonic progression from that in the National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment, 1998) but instead was based on the nature of the orthography of written English. A special teaching method was also devised (Snappy Lesson®) which was underpinned by principles of learning theory.

Research data was collected from a large number of pupils as the project school became the largest primary school in the Local Education Authority during the course of the study. From the academic year 1997-1998 the school has had a three-form entry of about 90 pupils. These pupils are all taught synthetic phonics from the outset in Reception in their mainstream classes and phonics teaching extends and develops as the children pass through the school. Individual word reading and spelling levels of whole cohorts of Reception pupils are first assessed after the first term on the synthetic phonics programme (in January of the Reception year). This allows for early identification of need and early intervention which is an important part of the teaching process. Results from this early intervention are reported in this paper for two consecutive year-groups. Whole reception cohorts are assessed again at the end of the Summer Term (June/July) and results are reported for six consecutive years. The results for Key Stage 1 SATs (the national tests for seven-year-olds in England) and for Key Stage 2 SATs (the national tests for eleven-year-olds in England) are reported for 2003.

## **The Instructional Method**

The system of teaching used in the study is underpinned by the belief that instruction is the major issue in addressing literacy acquisition and dyslexia. Key skills are taught from the outset in Reception. Six grapheme-phoneme correspondences are taught each week and over a seven- to eight-week period the main 42 phonemes of English are covered. At the same time children are taught the two phonological skills of blending and segmenting. Hence from the beginning children are taught how to use their code knowledge to read and write. They are taught how to blend phonemes together in order to read words, how to segment words into

phonemes and how to write down letters for the phonemes. Early identification of need is important. This allows for early intervention which contributes to the programme's effectiveness. Throughout Key Stage 1 (children aged 4+ to 7+) and Key Stage 2 (children aged 7+ to 11+) pupils follow a phonics progression of increasing orthographic complexity which differs from that laid down in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). The synthetic phonics programme takes pupils through seven steps:

- **Step 1** starts with 3-phoneme words using only alphabet phonemes (the sounds represented by single letters of the alphabet) such as 'fun' and 'bus' (at Step 1.1), moving on to 4- and 5- alphabet phoneme words such as 'went' (at Step 1.3), 'stop' (at Step 1.4) and 'crisp' (at Step 1.5 of the programme). There is also a Step 1.2 which is found to be motivating for older pupils requiring intervention. This involves consonant-vowel-consonant words of two syllables such as 'velvet', 'sudden', 'picnic' and 'goblet'.
- **Step 2** involves words containing consonant digraphs such as 'ring' (at Step 2.1) and vowel digraphs such as 'toast' (at Step 2.2), 'park' (at Step 2.3) and 'soil' (at Step 2.4).
- **Step 3** deals with the alternative spellings for sounds. Step 3A of the programme covers vowels such as the phoneme /ai/ in 'brain', 'gate', 'day', 'they' and 'paper' (at Step 3A.2). Step 3B of the programme covers consonants such as the phoneme /c/ in 'scrap', 'king', 'duck' and 'chemist' (at Step 3B.1).
- **Step 4** makes a morphological analysis of polysyllabic words into units which convey meaning: prefixes, root words and suffixes such as 'un/break/able' and 'dis/courage/ment'.
- **Steps 5 and 6** deal with the six different syllable types in polysyllabic words such as 'kin/es/thet/ic', 'ex/plode', 'mu/sic', 'pea/nut', 'bub/ble' and 'mar/ket'.
- **Step 7** involves words which contain special suffixes which can be considered as individual chunks or units, such as the special suffix /shun/ which can be spelt as <tion> in 'vacation', <sion> in 'extension', <ssion> in 'passion', <cion> in 'suspicion', <cian> in 'musician' and <cean> in "ocean" (at Step 7.1 of the programme).

The programme works at phoneme, word and sentence levels. Reading and writing skills are integrated rather than being taught separately. There is repetition and reinforcement built into the programme. Multisensory rather than multistrategy methods of instruction are used – in other words, the strategy is always a grapheme-phoneme one, but the children are taught to use their senses of hearing, seeing and even feeling (as they become aware of their sensations in pronouncing phonemes, flicking up phoneme fingers, manipulating grapheme cards, sky-writing graphemes in the air and writing on their individual white boards, on the classroom board and in their exercise books.). The principle of little and often is stressed.

Modelled writing has also been developed which builds on a progression of skills and stresses the importance of vocalisation of ideas and regularisation of written language. For example, a child at the stage of being able to write alphabet phoneme words at four-phoneme level at Step 1.3 may vocalise his own sentence 'The huge hurricane blew down the garden shed'. This is wonderful oral language and his verbal expression and vocabulary can be praised, valued and reinforced (and may be scribed), but for independent writing of his own sentences in the Snappy Lesson the success criterion is for accuracy, so the teacher would regularise the sentence for writing as, for example, 'The big wind hit the hut'. The child would repeat this orally and should be able to write it with 100% accuracy and include a capital letter at the beginning and a full stop at the end. Once the sentence is written, the child would read it back for checking and reading practice. There will be other opportunities for children's extended creative writing, and writing samples from the school indicate a high level of creativity.

Phonics at sound, word, sentence and eventually text levels is taught daily during the whole-class parts of the Literacy Hour and during group time. Every opportunity is taken to reinforce its use throughout classwork during the school day. For slow-to-start children and those with special educational needs there may be extra Snappy Lessons in small groups. In Reception, phonemes are taught at the rate of six per week and the first forty-two phonemes are covered in about eight weeks. When children have a reasonable grasp of phoneme-grapheme correspondences and can blend they are introduced to decodable books. The majority of children need to practise with decodable books for only a few weeks before moving on to other reading books. Slow-to-start children are likely to take longer. There is now additional decodable text-level work written specially to support Sound Discovery.

At Easter 1997, the school started using the synthetic phonics programme Jolly Phonics (Lloyd, 1992). The following academic year 1998-9, Jolly Phonics was introduced to Reception pupils from the beginning of the autumn term. For the next academic year (1998-1999) decodable reading books were written to go with the Jolly Phonics programme (Phonics First Books, Grant, 1998) and were used to develop children's blending skills further. Compared with the previous year, the little books were found to produce a 5 months' additional advancement in reading skills when measured in Summer 1999, so that the children's average reading was 17 months ahead of chronological age (with a cohort of 85 children receiving Jolly Phonics *plus* Phonics First Books). In summer 1998, the children's average reading had been 12 months above chronological age (with cohort of 90 pupils receiving Jolly Phonics *without* Phonics First Books). (See table 1.)

As the study progressed, the thinking and method of teaching were shaped by influences such as:

1. academic books (e.g. Macmillan, 1997; McGuinness, D., 1998),
2. literacy and language programmes (e.g. McGuinness, C. and G., 1998; Steere, Peck and Kahn, 1996, Wilson, 1998),
3. academic research findings from universities such as
  - (a) St Andrew's (Johnston and Watson, 1997 and 1998),
  - (b) Dundee (Seymour and Duncan, 1997),
  - (c) York (Muter, Hulme, Snowling and Taylor, 1997; Nation and Hulme, 1997),
  - (d) Institute of Education, London (Stuart, 1999),
  - (e) Warwick (Solity, Deavers, Kerfoot, Crane and Cannon, 1999)
4. Visits to schools (e.g. to Kobi Nazrul School, London, where Ruth Miskin was head teacher and to Woods Loke School, Lowestoft, where Sue Lloyd was a teacher).

A new synthetic phonics programme, Sound Discovery, was developed. It started being used by the project school in the academic year 1999-2000. This phonics programme aimed to extend literacy instruction through Key Stage 1 and into Key Stage 2 of the project school. It was also designed to be used in Key Stages 3 and 4 and potentially also into adulthood. Results are available for a whole cohort of Year 7 pupils at Key Stage 3 (Hunt, 2000). Sound Discovery built on Jolly Phonics, dovetailed with it, and was designed as a programme for intervention as well as for first-time teaching.

## **Results for whole cohorts using standardised word-reading and spelling tests**

In the Summer Term 1997 all pupils in Reception (66 children) in the project school started a trial study in mainstream class teaching with synthetic phonics. In that first term, there was a

significant reduction in the SEN Register and in June 1997 the children on average were 6 months ahead of chronological age for both individual word reading and spelling. This was a remarkable result for the school given its intake: entry assessments show that children enter this school with E for language, D for writing and D for social skills (Crown Copyright, Inspection Report, 2000). Since 1997 the school has built on these findings (Wainwright and Grant, 1999).

First starting in the academic year 1998-1999, synthetic phonics teaching *plus* decodable reading books (Phonics First Books) are used from the outset in Reception. On average each year pupils now perform about 16 months above chronological age in reading and spelling by the end of Reception (see Table 1). The reading test used is Burt Individual Word Reading Test and the spelling test is Schonell B.

**Table 1: average reading and spelling scores above chronological age for whole Reception cohorts in this study**

Reception pupils	No. of pupils	Reading	Spelling
Summer 1997	66	+6 months	+6 months
Summer 1998	90	+12 months	+17 months
Summer 1999	85	+17 months	+18 months
Summer 2000	86	+16 months	+18 months
Summer 2001	84	+16 months	+18 months
Summer 2002	89	+15 months	+16 months

Literacy standards for all pupils were raised, there was a lack of summer birthday delay, and there was a reduction in numbers on the SEN Register and of the gender gap. There have been no new specific learning difficulties/dyslexia Statements of SEN since 1997, when the school started using synthetic phonics. These results represent substantial ‘value-added’ in view of the Base Line assessment data.

Some general observations were made about the learning of the ‘synthetic phonics’ children:

- there was no significant difference in literacy skills between boys and girls;
- there was no significant difference in literacy skills between children with summer birthdays and others;
- there were no children with English as an Additional Language on the SEN register;
- there was no significant difference between children eligible for free school meals and others;
- SEN children benefited from early identification and intervention;
- few children moved beyond School Action Plus (Stage 3) of the SEN Code of Practice;
- on average, Reception children could read 40 out of the 45 NLS List 1 High Frequency Words; 53% could read all 45 words;
- there was a significant improvement in the listening skills, concentration span and ability to follow instructions for all children;
- low language levels were impacted by increased awareness of sounds, the ability to segment and blend at word level and the exposure to increased vocabulary and good sentence structure found in extension work at sentence level;
- group work teaching was effective at developing attention, focus, social skills and social interaction.

In summary, the method of instruction appeared to be more powerful than the effects of gender, birth, first language, poor initial language levels and social factors (as measured by free school meals).

## **Results for top and bottom quartiles**

In the academic year 1999-2000 an analysis was made of the achievements of the top 25% and bottom 25% of the whole cohort.

**Table 2: average reading and spelling scores above chronological age for the top and bottom quartiles of the 1999-2000 cohort of Reception pupils in the study**

	Reading	Spelling
Top quartile	+26 months	+26 months
Bottom quartile	+8 months	+12 months

The results in Table 2 show that the more able did extremely well but that the achievements of the less able children were also raised. It is not surprising that few children moved beyond School Action Plus level of the Code of Practice and the numbers of children on the SEN Register were reduced.

## **Results relating to early intervention**

The importance of early identification and intervention is recognised in the programme for all pupils with literacy difficulties. To identify the slow-to-start pupils the whole cohort's individual word reading and spelling skills are assessed in January when they have all experienced one term of synthetic phonics. Most children will have made measurable progress but some will not.

In the 1999-2000 Reception cohort eight children (out of 86) were identified as having no measurable reading or spelling ages in the January 2000 tests. This constituted about 9% of Reception pupils as a potential tail of underachievers. All other children in the cohort were making good progress. In the 2000-2001 Reception cohort all 84 pupils scored on either the reading or the spelling tests in January 2001. However an intervention group was selected as two pupils had a measurable reading age but failed to score on the spelling test and two other pupils failed to score on the reading test although they achieved a measurable spelling age. This group of four pupils constituted about 5% of the Reception cohort and were considered as a potential tail of underachievement. All other children in the cohort had made measurable progress in both reading and spelling in the January tests.

In both years, the slow-to-start reception pupils followed a group intervention programmes in the form of extra Snappy Lessons. These were delivered about three times a week for about 15 minutes per session with their Nursery Nurse, during the Spring and Summer terms, until June. They took place during Registration and were in addition to the Snappy Lessons of synthetic phonics teaching the children were receiving during the Literacy Hour with their whole class and in the small-group time during the Hour when the curriculum was being matched to the level of need. We did not think that these children needed a different form of teaching or programme, but rather that they needed a little bit more teaching a little more frequently. The programme is multisensory and has reinforcement and repetition built in, to take account of

different learning styles and poor memories, so that children with poor visual or auditory memories will not be penalised as the programme integrates what children see with what they hear and with what they do in a multisensory way, which particularly assists such children.

The results show in Table 3 that the early intervention virtually eliminated the potential tail of underachievement. It shows the average reading and spelling scores to be above chronological age for the intervention groups by the end of the intervention in the Summer Term.

**Table 3: average reading and spelling scores above chronological age for Reception pupils in the intervention groups at the end of the early intervention in Reception**

	No. of pupils	Reading	Spelling
Summer 2000	8	+5 months	+9 months
Summer 2001	4	+8 months	+12 months

### Results relating to Key Stage 1 SATs in 2003

The study's Key Stage 1 SATs results in summer 2003 (see Table 4) show achievements which lie above the national and the LEA's averages. The cohort number was 81 and no children were disapplied.

**Table 4: Key Stage 1 SATs results 2003 for the study**

Reading	Level 2+	95%
	Level 2B+	88%
	Level 3	40%
Writing	Level 2+	95%
	Level 2B+	88%
	Level 3	31%

The 'expected level' nationally for KS1 SATs is Level 2, but this is subdivided into 2A, 2B and 2C. It is generally considered that Level 2B and above at KS1 SATs is required in order to reach Level 4 (the 'expected level') at KS2 SATs. In 2003, 69% nationally reached Level 2B (31% did not reach this level) compared with the figure of 88% for the study who reached Level 2B (12% did not reach this level). This indicates the advantage that the study's cohort is likely to experience with KS2 SATs, with the secondary school curriculum and also, looking further ahead, in taking the General Certificate of Education taken at the age of 16 years. It can also be postulated that nationally the 31% of pupils who did not reach Level 2B in 2003 may not read well enough at 11 years of age to cope with the secondary school curriculum. The figure of 31% nationally compares with 12% from the study, which is significantly different at the 1% level. An analysis of girls' and boys' Level 3 reading results in the study (see Table 5) indicates that these are virtually identical for girls and boys.

**Table 5: Key Stage 1 SATs results 2003 – Level 3 reading for girls and boys in the study**

	Boys and girls	Girls	Boys
Level 3 Reading	40%	40%	39%

An analysis of girls’ and boys’ writing results in the study for Level 3 in the study does show a gender gap (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Key Stage 1 SATs results 2003 – Level 3 writing for boys and girls in the study**

	Boys and Girls	Girls	Boys
Level 3 Writing	31%	35%	24%

However, when compared with the LEA’s averages the gender gap in the study is not so pronounced and both the girls and the boys in the study achieved significantly higher (at the 1% level of significance) than the LEA and national figures (Table 7).

**Table 7: Key Stage 1 SATs results 2003 –Level 3 writing for girls and boys in the study compared with the Local Education Authority figures**

	Girls	Boys
Study’s Level 3 Writing	35%	24%
LEA ‘s Level 3 Writing	20%	8%
National Level 3 Writing	12%	7%

### **Results relating to Key Stage 2 SATs in 2003**

The first cohort of 66 children starting synthetic phonics at Easter 1997 took their Key Stage 2 SATs in 2003. This group comprised 33 girls and 33 boys. No children were disapplied from taking the Key Stage 2 SATs. The cohort of 66 pupils achieved 89.4% Level 4+ for English without a significant gender gap (see Table 8). The achievement for the whole cohort of 66 pupils achieved 89.4% Level 4+ English without a significant gender gap (see Table 8). This achievement for the whole cohort (89.4%) is significantly higher, at the 1% level, than the comparable LEA figure of 79% and the national figure of 74%.

**Table 8: Key Stage 2 SATs results 2003 – Level 4+ English for the cohort**

	Girls plus Boys	Girls	Boys
Level 4+ English	89.4%	90.9%	87.9%

Level 5 reading results also did not show a gender gap for the cohort, with boys and girls performing exactly the same (Table 9).

**Table 9: Key Stage 2 SATs results 2003 – Level 5 Reading for the cohort**

	Girls plus Boys	Girls	Boys
Level 5 Reading	42.4%	42.4%	42.4%

Also of interest are the figures for Level 5 boys' writing for the cohort. The boys performed significantly better than the girls, at the 1% level (see Table 10).

**Table 10: Key Stage 2 SATs results 2003 – Level 5 writing for the cohort**

	Girls plus Boys	Girls	Boys
Level 5 Writing	27.3%	21.2%	33.3%

It is interesting to compare the cohort's Level 5 writing results with the LEA and national figures. The cohort's boys performed significantly better, at the 1% level, than the LEA and national figures for boys (Table 11).

**Table 11: Key Stage 2 SATs results 2003 – Level 5 writing for girls and boys in the cohort compared with LEA and national figures**

	Girls	Boys
The cohort's Level 5 Writing	21.2%	<b>33.3%</b>
LEA Level 5 Writing	19.4%	<b>9.5%</b>
National Level 5 Writing	20%	<b>11%</b>

The Year 6 girls in the study performed better at Level 5 than the LEA and national figures for girls, but not significantly so (see Table 11). However, it should be noted that when Levels 4 and 5 English results were considered together, the girls' figure (88%) *was* significantly above the national average (69%) and also above the LEA average (75%) although again not significantly so.

## **Discussion**

The evidence suggests that the school under study is effective in teaching literacy to all its pupils. The school has shown this effectiveness with respect to pupils with literacy-related learning difficulties whether these are specific to literacy (Specific Learning Difficulties/dyslexia) or associated with wider difficulties in learning. The school has shown a high level of literacy attainment for its intake.

It is believed that the major issue in addressing literacy difficulty, whether related to dyslexia or more general difficulties, is one of instruction. It is significant that the school uses a strategy for teaching literacy which differs from the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). The school has demonstrated greater gains in pupils' literacy attainments than would be expected from using the NLS.

The strategy for teaching literacy is called synthetic phonics. The essence of synthetic phonics is that key skills need to be taught from Reception using a staged introduction of 42 grapheme-phoneme correspondences coupled with the use of this knowledge to blend phonemes for reading and to segment words into phonemes for spelling and write down the letters. Synthetic

phonics instruction is then used throughout the school to reinforce, extend, generalise and develop literacy skills.

It is significant that synthetic phonics is used for first-time teaching and throughout the school in mainstream classes as a primary strategy for reading and spelling. It is not just used for intervention. It is hypothesised that schools which use synthetic phonics solely for intervention and not as a primary strategy for mainstream classes and for first-time teaching will not be as successful at raising literacy standards for all their children. Early identification of need and the effectiveness of early intervention are also vitally linked to raising literacy standards for all.

Success has been shown in terms of a lack of a summer birthday lag, reduction of numbers on the SEN Register and reduction of the gender gap. There have been no new specific learning difficulties/dyslexia Statements of SEN since 1997, when the school started using synthetic phonics. These results represent substantial 'value-added' as children enter the school with low language, writing and social skills.

The study's Key Stage 1 SATs results in summer 2003 show achievements which lie above the national and LEA figures.

It has been possible to track through the first cohort of 'synthetic phonics' children from Easter 1997 in Reception to their Key Stage 2 SATs in summer 2003. There was no gender gap for Level 5 reading and boys did significantly better than girls for Level 5 writing. Perhaps the most impressive statistic was that a third of the boys achieved Level 5 writing, which is significantly above national and LEA figures. When Level 4 and 5 writing results were considered together, however, the girls, too, significantly outperformed the national average. They also outperformed the LEA average, but not at a level which was statistically significant.

The systematic and structured nature of synthetic phonics was found to be successful at raising literacy standards for all pupils but the positive effects appear to be more pronounced with boys. It can be hypothesised that the pedagogy underpinning synthetic phonics is particularly effective with boys. There are parallels with the strategies suggested by other research workers as being particularly effective with boys (Hannan, 2000).

This study indicated that 11-year-old boys appeared to be more able writers than girls, but that the girls as well as the boys in the study outperformed the national averages for writing.

## **Conclusions**

National figures indicate that boys underachieve in early literacy skills and that this gap in attainment widens with age. This research has demonstrated that underachievement in boys is by no means inevitable. The synthetic phonics approach has been shown to raise literacy attainment for all pupils and to reduce the gender gap with respect to literacy in general and with respect to writing in particular.

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## **Boys and Girls: Academic Achievement Gap**

A debate on the above topic took place in the House of Lords on 24 March 2004. Baroness Ashton (the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Education and Skills) spoke about attempts which were being made to raise the achievement of boys. *Hansard* records the following response from Lord Quirk:

‘My Lords, does the Minister accept that the achievement gap at GCSE is related to a literacy gap which is already significant at the age of nine and which is as internationally widespread as it is puzzlingly recent? The noble Baroness will of course be familiar with research at the universities of Hull and St Andrews by Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson, and elsewhere by Marlynne Grant, showing that this literacy gap can be entirely closed by a switch of teaching method. Will the Minister therefore consult with experts such as Jennifer Chew and Bonnie Macmillan about evidence that the gap is worst in countries that have neglected phonics teaching in recent years?’

Baroness Ashton replied that phonics teaching was being emphasised, particularly in Key Stage 1 and the early years, for precisely the reasons identified by Lord Quirk. This is not in dispute. What is being questioned by the RRF and others, however, is whether the kind of phonics being taught is in line with the best research findings. In terms of standards achieved and the elimination of the gender gap, the NLS is clearly being outperformed by (for example) the rather different approaches being used in the Early Reading Research project carried out by Dr Jonathan Solity and his colleagues, in the study reported by Dr Marlynne Grant in this Newsletter, and in the Clackmannanshire study carried out by Prof. Rhona Johnston and Dr Joyce Watson.

With regard to the international comparisons, Baroness Ashton commented that ‘it is worth saying that the gender gap in England is significantly smaller than in most other OECD countries’. That statement is rather puzzling in view of the fact that one of the more recent studies, the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (see Newsletter 51, page 21), showed England to be 28th out of 36 countries in terms of gender gap, with only Cyprus, Bulgaria, Singapore, the Republic of Moldova, New Zealand, Iran, Belize and Kuwait below it.

# Preamble to Research Digest

**Jennifer Chew**

I do not usually write a preamble to the Research Digest, but am doing so on this occasion because the topic on which I am focusing is rather complex and gives rise to differences of opinion even among people who are otherwise like-minded about the importance of phonics teaching. The topic is phonemic awareness. This term has sometimes been used interchangeably with ‘phonological awareness’, particularly in studies dating back more than a decade, but most researchers now use ‘phonological awareness’ to mean awareness of large as well as small units of sound within words (syllables and rhymes as well as phonemes) and ‘phonemic awareness’ to mean awareness specifically of the smallest units – phonemes.

Everyone agrees that conscious awareness of phonemes in spoken words is strongly related to reading ability, but opinion is much more divided on the exact nature of this relationship. In particular, there has been almost equal support for two rather different views: one is that children need to be aware of phonemes in spoken words *before* they will have much ability to understand and apply the alphabetic code in reading, and the other is that this awareness develops most easily and efficiently *as* they learn to read.

The ‘before’ view, which is quite common in the USA, is encapsulated in the opening sentence of the 1998 book *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children* by Adams, Foorman, Lundberg and Beeler: ‘Before children can make sense of the alphabetic principle, they must understand that those sounds that are paired with the letters are one and the same as the sounds of speech’. The ‘classroom curriculum’ contained in this book consists of aural/oral exercises on phonological and phonemic awareness which, when used with USA kindergartners (children aged five-plus), continue for most of the school year before the sounds are paired with letters. This leaves no doubt about the ‘before-ness’. Similarly, research carried out by the USA National Institute of Child Health and Development has been reported as concluding that ‘developing a conscious awareness of the smaller sounds in words was essential to mastering the next step in learning to read, phonics’, with ‘phonics’ being defined as ‘the ability to match spoken phonemes to the individual letters of the alphabet that represent them’ (www.educationnews.org, 21 April 2004). Of course not all USA programmes provide such lengthy prior auditory training as the Adams et al. programme: PhonoGraphix, for example, claims to start with sounds but introduces each letter within seconds of introducing the sound, which means that ‘before-ness’ is not strongly emphasised in practice. There are also shades of opinion about the extent to which phonemic awareness is essential, as distinct from merely desirable, before children are taught the alphabetic code. Where ‘before-ness’ is emphasised, there is nevertheless reasonable agreement that phonemic awareness plays something of a causal role in reading acquisition: good prior phonemic awareness is seen as causing or at least helping children to understand the alphabetic code easily, and poor prior phonemic awareness is seen as causing them to struggle.

This contrasts with UK and European synthetic phonics thinking, which emphasises phonemic awareness not *before* but *as* children learn to read. Synthetic phonics teachers find, in practice, that children start to realise that spoken words are made up of phonemes as they start learning letters and take their first steps in reading words by sounding out and blending. This embryonic awareness then boosts further understanding of the alphabetic code. We might have expected this type of synthetic phonics thinking to influence *Progression in Phonics (PiPs)*, which was an attempt to strengthen the phonics teaching in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), but the authors were apparently more influenced by the phonemic-awareness-should-come-first view, as is evident from their use of the words ‘first’ and ‘then’ in the following statement from page

3 of *PiPs*: ‘The most effective phonics instruction teaches children to identify phonemes in spoken language first, then to understand how these are represented by letters and letter combinations (graphemes)’. By contrast, ‘teaching the sounds that match letters and letter combinations’ is said to be ‘inefficient and often confusing’. *PiPs* does not say that it is *essential* for children to be able to identify phonemes in spoken words as a first step (just that it is ‘better’) and does not spend nearly as long on teaching this skill as the Adams et al. programme does, but, as Diane McGuinness pointed out in RRF Newsletter 51, its logic on letters and sounds is confused. No wonder NLS results are not nearly as good as synthetic phonics results.

The statements in *PiPs* about the approaches regarded as ‘most effective’ on the one hand and as ‘inefficient’ and ‘confusing’ on the other are juxtaposed with a side-heading and introductory paragraph referring in a general way to ‘evidence’ and ‘research’. When I first read *PiPs* in 1999, I took this to mean that research support was being claimed for the statements. The research which I myself knew of at the time did not strike me as supporting the NLS position as strongly as *PiPs* seemed to be suggesting. I therefore wrote asking for references so that I could read the research for myself. The first reply I received did not supply any references. I wrote again, reiterating my request for references. I then received a reply stating that the NLS was ‘not claiming research evidence in making the point you are querying’. In that case, what *was* the basis for the *PiPs* statements, and why did they appear in a context which suggested that they *were* research-based?

This may all seem rather convoluted, but I believe that it is important because *PiPs*, the official guide on phonics teaching, is arguably wrong. Even before it was published, opinion among researchers was fairly evenly divided, as indicated above, and it would have been better if *PiPs* had reflected this rather than stating that the ‘before’ type of teaching was definitely ‘the most effective phonics instruction’. Since its publication, however, several studies (for example those dealt with in the Research Digest below) have cast doubt on the validity of the ‘before’ view and have offered strong support for the ‘as’ view, where phonemic awareness is regarded as developing most easily and effectively alongside letter knowledge. The effectiveness is maximised if a systematic sounding-out-and-blending approach is used for beginning reading, but the Blaiklock study (see below) shows that even when a whole-language approach is used, some children begin to be aware of phonemes once they know most letter-names and can read some words.

The role of letter knowledge in promoting phonemic awareness was referred to by one of our own RRF committee members, Dr Bonnie Macmillan, in an article in *Journal of Research in Reading*, Vol. 25 No. 1, February 2002 (see also Newsletter 48, April 2002, p. 23). Her article is cited with approval in the first two research studies summarised in this Research Digest. The third study also provides support for the view that alphabet knowledge is a crucial factor in developing phonemic awareness, as does the work of Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson in Scotland.

Teachers should not go on being given the impression that a certain way of teaching phonics is ‘the most effective’ if it is not. The NLS approach, which ‘teaches children to identify phonemes in spoken language first, then to understand how these are represented by letters and letter combinations’ has failed to meet government targets. True synthetic phonics introduces letters and sounds together: this approach has good support from research, and schools teaching this way have for years met, and indeed exceeded, government targets. When will the authorities take note of this?

**Blaiklock, K.E., 2004. The importance of letter knowledge in the relationship between phonological awareness and reading. *Journal of Research in Reading*, Vol. 27 Issue 1, February 2004.** Working in New Zealand, where whole language is the favoured approach, Blaiklock used various measures to test children six times in their first year at school and three times in the second year. He found that they knew, on average, only four letter names and .17 of a letter-sound when they started school and that none of them showed any ability at all to manipulate phonemes in spoken words (for example, given the word 'coat', they were unable to say what word was left if the first sound was removed). They began to score on the phonemic awareness task, though still poorly, only about half way through the first year, when, on average, they could name about 17 letters and could read about 6 words on the Burt test. Blaiklock states that his findings are 'consistent with a number of studies that indicate that phoneme awareness is initially a consequence of developing literacy skills'. He also states that his findings 'emphasise the importance of taking account of letter knowledge when examining the relationship between phonological awareness and reading' and that 'Although letter-sound knowledge may not be emphasised in New Zealand classrooms,...children who learnt letter sounds quickly were more likely to make greater progress in reading'. It is very interesting that when no explicit teaching of phonemes took place, some children nevertheless started to deduce something about phonemes after learning letters and whole-language strategies for word-reading, and that these were the children who then made most progress in reading.

**Castles, A. and Coltheart, M., 2004. Is there a causal link from phonological awareness to success in learning to read? *Cognition* 91, 2004.** The researchers review all the relevant studies and 're-assess the evidence that phonological awareness represents a skill specific to spoken language that precedes and directly influences the process of reading acquisition'. Like Macmillan and Blaiklock, they are interested in 'the degree to which studies to date have controlled for existing literacy skills in their participants and the influence that these skills might have on performance on phonological awareness tasks'. This is important, because if children have any literacy skills at all when their phonological awareness is first tested, one cannot rule out the possibility that they may rely wholly or partly on letter-knowledge rather than purely on phonological analysis. Castles and Coltheart note that 'although there is support in the...literature for the hypothesis that phonemic awareness enables, or at least assists, literacy acquisition, there is also considerable support for the proposal that the causality flows in the reverse direction... . At the very least, there would clearly seem to be a complex reciprocal relationship between the two sets of skills'. They 'conclude that no study has provided unequivocal evidence that there is a causal link from phonological awareness to success in reading and spelling acquisition'. Instead, the evidence is that 'it is the learning of relationships between letters and sounds in the context of reading instruction, rather than the ability to reflect upon speech sounds in isolation prior to reading, that is vital for progress in literacy'.

**Mann, V., and Wimmer, H., 2002. Phoneme awareness and pathways into literacy: A comparison of German and American children. *Reading and writing: An interdisciplinary journal* 15, 2002.** Mann and Wimmer start by highlighting a contrast between early teaching in the USA and German-speaking countries: 'Where American kindergartners are taught letters and letter sounds, German kindergartners are not; where American first and second graders receive an eclectic blend of whole language, whole word and phonics-based approaches, their German counterparts are taught by an intensive synthetic phonics approach'. They found that the American kindergartners knew far more letters, had far more phonemic awareness and could read more words than the German kindergartners – in fact the German children were

virtually at floor in all these areas. By the end of first grade, however, the position was largely reversed: ‘the German children exhibited more perfect letter knowledge than their American counterparts and superior pseudoword decoding as well’, though they were on a par in phonemic awareness. The researchers believe that it was the ‘intensive synthetic phonics approach’ used with the German children once they entered Grade 1 which enabled them to overtake the American children in letter-knowledge and decoding, although the likelihood that the relative simplicity of German orthography played a role is also acknowledged. Another possibility which is briefly dealt with is that dyslexic children have language problems that make the acquisition of phonemic awareness harder for them, but the general conclusion of the researchers is that their findings ‘are consistent with a view that phoneme awareness develops primarily as a product of literacy exposure’.

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### Snippets from Australia

- In October 2003, the Sydney Morning Herald reported that the principal of a primary school in ‘an exceptionally disadvantaged area’ had ‘overseen an extraordinary transformation’ by introducing ‘a reading programme that includes rigorous phonics instruction’. Previously, more than 80% of his pupils were reading below an acceptable level for their age. By 2003, statewide literacy tests put this school in the top 10% in Victoria.
- On 21 April 2004, the Higher Education section of *The Australian* printed an edited version of a letter sent to the federal Education Minister. This was signed by twenty-six ‘researchers, psychologists, linguists and educators’, who wrote ‘We would like particularly to draw your attention to the continuing discrepancy between the model of reading development that forms the basis for most of our school curriculums and teaching methods, and the model of reading development that is emerging as a result of the research into reading that has been undertaken during the past 20 to 30 years’. Such research showed ‘that mastery of the alphabetic code is essential to proficient reading and that methods of instruction that teach this code directly are more effective than those that do not’. The letter to the federal Education Minister was accompanied by explanatory notes which quoted the Rayner et al. article from RRF Newsletter No. 50 in full (original letter and explanatory notes can be viewed on RRF website).

## Learning to read and write – Fashion or fact?

Sue Lloyd

The following statement seems particularly apt: *Education is roughly at the same stage that the doctors were one hundred years ago when drugs were administered without being tested. Many patients benefited, some deteriorated and a significant number died. Eventually this practice became illegal and rigorous testing of drugs was introduced.*

This certainly applies to the teaching of reading, except that the bottom group of children do not die from the lack of correct evidence-based phonics teaching, but they certainly have their education, and often their adult lives, ruined by it. Literacy programmes, especially those promoted by the government, really should be tested with the same rigour that is applied in the drugs industry.

Back in 1990, Martin Turner revealed in his book *Sponsored Reading Failure* that the number of children with literacy problems was increasing at an alarming rate. The evidence that he

presented was based on the test results that he, his fellow educational psychologists and Local Education Authorities had amassed over many years. The psychologists believed that the cause of the problem was the lack of phonics teaching in our schools. This revelation cost Martin Turner his job, but also jolted the government into becoming directly involved. No longer could this kind of failure be tolerated, especially as good literacy skills were essential for our modern society and workforce.

Suddenly the people at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES – formerly the Department for Education and Employment) took on a new role. Instead of carrying out their usual promotion of fashionable ideas, such as the ‘real books’ approach and emergent reading/writing, they were given the brief by the government to write and promote an effective literacy programme which included phonics. This became the National Literacy Strategy (NLS).

As the NLS was being developed many educationalists and teachers were consulted about the best way to teach phonics. Indeed it appears that several of their ideas were written into the NLS, but did this hodgepodge of ideas make an effective programme?

There was an element of testing in the pilot study for the NLS: the ‘Evaluation of the National Literacy Project Summary Report’ by Marion Sainsbury, which was published by the National Foundation for Educational Research in December 1998. The schools involved in this pilot project showed improvement, but they were still below average and certainly had far poorer results than the schools that used synthetic phonics. So right from the beginning it was known that the NLS did not produce the best results, and yet all schools were made to feel that they must follow this programme. Why were the test results of the NLS pilot not distributed with the NLS materials? Then head-teachers would have been able to make up their own minds whether to implement it or not.

When the NLS was published, I realised that the principles behind it were poor. For example, there were 45 ‘high frequency words to be taught as “sight recognition” words’ in Reception, and a further 112 words to be similarly taught in Years 1 and 2. Without knowledge of letter sounds and the skill of blending, many children are unable to remember words by sight. In the school where I was teaching, we had abandoned this ‘look and say’ type of teaching in the 1970s because it failed so many children. In July 1998, before we were expected to follow the NLS, we tested our children at the end of their Reception year to find out how many of the 45 ‘sight words’ they could read. At the same time, we also tested them on the Year 1 and 2 list of sight words. The teacher of this class of 27 did not know what the NLS words were, so could not have coached the children on them. She had followed our usual Jolly Phonics programme. The results for these Reception children were as follows:

Reception words: on average, 41 out of 45 (91%) correctly read\*.

Year 1 and 2 words: on average, 72 out of 112 correctly read.

These results were sent to John Stannard, then director of the NLS. I explained that I would like to compare the performance of our children with that of the children who were specifically taught these words in the NLS trial. His reply was *‘Unfortunately I don’t have comparable data to show you because similar tests were not conducted using these word lists’*.

It is staggering that not even this simple test was carried out. Surely the people in the DfES would have wanted to know how easy it was for the children to learn the words this way.

Several researchers have warned of the dangers of teaching a sight vocabulary in the early stages of teaching reading and yet this logographic stage is part of the NLS. The children in our school, who did not learn sight words by their shape, were probably able to read a higher number of words successfully than the children who were taught the NLS sight words, but this was impossible to prove because the NLS team had omitted to test their children. Where is the accountability in that?

It is natural for teachers and head-teachers to be influenced by the DfES, advisers, Ofsted inspectors and college lecturers because they hold higher posts of responsibility and are expected to be more knowledgeable. Yet these are the very people who, without any evidence of the effectiveness of their ideas, led us into the fashionable teaching methods that have badly failed the bottom 30% of our children. The NLS was promoted in our schools with an almost mandatory zeal, but, as we have seen, without much evidence that it was an excellent and effective programme.

Surely it is time that we really came into the 21st century, learnt to respect evidence-based research, and gave teachers the facts, instead of misleading them with fashionable ideas.

Sue Lloyd is the leading author of *The Phonics Handbook*.

\*Editor's comment: Note that these results are very similar to those obtained when the children in Marlynne Grant's study were tested on the same words (see page 9).

## **One impression of the state of play for teachers and children in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 – the dog's dinner**

**Debbie Hepplewhite**

The speculation over the most suitable provision for our six year olds (Y1) is accelerating as early years advisers encourage headteachers and teachers to take the 'learning through play' philosophy of the Foundation Stage (FS) upwards into at least Year 1.

Ofsted intentionally contributed to the national debate about early education in England through its report *'The education of six year olds in England, Denmark and Finland'* (July 2003). In the main findings, it was noted that whilst "*The curriculum is much more centralised and closely defined in England than the other two countries*" nevertheless several teachers commented (and I do believe that this is a reflection of the reality) that "*they were caught between the expectations of the Foundation Stage on the one hand and the impact of the National Curriculum testing system in Year 2 on the other.*" This is far from a satisfactory situation.

It raises the question of whether the demanding subject-based National Curriculum for Key Stage 1 (KS1) in England is really appropriate. If curriculum and practice *have* been identified as no longer recommended for six year olds, and teachers *are* increasingly expressing insecurity about what to provide, when is anyone going to do anything about Key Stage 1 expectations on a statutory level – or consider removing the statutory nature of the National Curriculum itself?

Very relevant to the English early years debate and described in Ofsted's main findings was the fact that whilst English classrooms in the sample were well-resourced they were "cramped" with "excessively complex layouts" whereas in Finland "the quality of design, furniture, equipment was exceptional, as was the amount of space." But according to Ofsted, "More challenging in their teaching implications than class size [number of pupils], however, were the classes in the small and medium-sized English schools where six year olds were mixed with other year groups, especially when these crossed the Foundation/Key Stage 1 boundary."

We are all aware that the 'good practice' which is required to be passed on often reflects the political face of the latest DfES initiative or Ofsted report. And yet, the *'Excellence and Enjoyment'* authors speak of 'diversity' and they purport to promote and respect it. This is certainly not my experience; for example, I have seen the requirement for cross-phase classes to be underpinned by two types of planning according to *different* national guidance documents without any compassion for the people who find this double expectation unreasonable or stressful. I have seen the teacher of a cross-phase class made up of three year-bands under immense pressure to reach national levels and above for the Year 2 children as a paper Panda (national comparative data) exercise whilst the LEA, Ofsted and HMI failed to follow the national warning, printed in Panda reports, that small cohorts cannot be judged by the same criteria as large cohorts. The hypocrisy in our profession never ceases to disappoint me.

Since I wrote my first version of this article, Ofsted has published yet another report contributing to the FS/KS1 debacle entitled, *'Transition from the Reception Year to Year 1, An evaluation by HMI'*, (HMI 221, May 2004). I was pleased to learn of this new report being, in the process myself of identifying the growing problems and witnessing worries amongst colleagues – worries also evident in professional discussion forums. Ofsted's *'Points for action'* are reproduced here in full:

## **Extract from 'Transition from the Reception Year to Year 1: An evaluation by HMI'**

### **Points for action**

**Those with national responsibility for the Foundation Stage and the Foundation Stage Profile should:**

- give detailed consideration to the links between the areas of learning in the Foundation Stage curriculum and the subjects of the National Curriculum
- clarify the purposes of the Foundation Stage Profile and how information is to be recorded.

**Those with responsibilities at LEA level should:**

- review the number and range of assessments teachers undertake during Year R
- clarify the functions of any pupil profiles they devise and the Foundation Stage Profile, especially where the former have been modified to include the latter.

**Schools which admit pupils to the Foundation Stage should:**

- ensure that learning experiences in Year 1 build upon the practical approaches and structured play in Year R

- review the number and range of assessments required during Year R, considering the use made of information subsequently in Year 1
- involve subject co-ordinators and co-ordinators for special educational needs in planning for curricular continuity from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1.

So, what *are* the powers-that-be going to do about this situation regarding educational philosophy, curriculum content, assessment and recording? We clearly have a very complex set of educational and resourcing issues to deal with in early years education. Urgent, open and *informed* debate is imperative. Teachers and children continue to suffer whilst advisers and inspectors acknowledge the dichotomies; in fact, I would suggest that as officials contribute their two-penny-worth, they are fuelling the problems. In reality, those in authority fail to give sufficient, realistic and practical guidance and support: rather they keep ‘reminding’ us that there is far more choice and autonomy for the teaching profession than the teachers themselves perceive. Is that the case? There is constant reference to the DfES publication, *‘Excellence and Enjoyment’*, as if this booklet alone provides all the answers and exonerates those in authority from their responsibility for the confused and overworked state of the English teaching profession!

Contradictory guidance – much of which is actually statutory (although all initiatives might as well be, such is the pressure from those who promote them) – is exacerbating teachers’ fears: fear of inspection, fear of doing the ‘wrong thing’, fear of lacking material to evidence accountability, fear of not reaching targets, fear of inadequate or unacceptable styles of planning and lesson structure, fear of short-changing the children themselves...the list is endless and I would argue that this is a true sign of the times. (A quick visit to the Early Years page on the online TES staffroom forum, <http://www.tes.co.uk/staffroom/>, will soon illustrate the insecurities and difficulties of early years practitioners). Quite simply, it seems to me as always that the responsibility is passed back to those with the least authority whereas surely it is incumbent upon those at the top to sort out this continuing mess – not to perpetuate it or ignore it!

For example, the Foundation Stage Profile was condemned by many from the outset and Ofsted has now added an authoritative voice to the commonsense brigade. But as usual the DfES has stood firm in its determination to persist with a flawed concept and document rather than listen to the voice of reason and acknowledge the evidence. In the Times Educational Supplement feature, *“Tickbox culture condemned”*, (21 May 2004), a DfES spokeswoman stated, *“This report covers the first year of implementation and the first year is always more challenging. The profile is the right mechanism to record children’s progress at the end of the reception year.”* Says who? Is anyone from the DfES prepared to put his/her name to this statement or, like the vast majority of DfES and QCA publications, is it going to be another nameless statement about an authorless document with the usual total lack of accountability?

And whilst the DfES fails to withdraw the Foundation Stage Profile, the teachers and pre-school practitioners are expected to struggle along spending a huge amount of time and energy on an exercise recognised as futile (pre-school practitioners often being paid only a few pounds an hour for the hours a week that they are with the children)? The Ofsted report stated, *“In general, completing the Profile (but not written comments) seemed to require between 60 and 90 minutes, once teachers became accustomed to it”*. And this is acceptable? A colleague of mine returned from a recent LEA Foundation Stage Profile training session in disbelief. She worked out that the 13 areas outlined in the Profile multiplied by the 8 early learning goals in each area needing at least one detailed observation/comment amounted to 104 written comments per child. Multiply this by 20 children and you would need at least 2,080 comments.

Some Foundation Stage settings have much higher numbers of children than 20 and very often they are in the private/community sector where there are no salaried professionals to take on such an arduous task. I am incredulous! Despite this clear criticism from Ofsted, will the LEAs choose to support the DfES in its persistence, or the teachers in their resistance? This fiasco is so typical of the type of demands placed on teachers nowadays is it any wonder that they are leaving full-time employment in significant numbers and instances of absence from stress grow daily? The job is increasingly unmanageable and practitioners are placed on automatic failure mode through the sheer impossibility of fulfilling current bureaucratic demands.

## **Starting ages, summer birthdays, maturity and ability levels, gender issues**

Where is the discussion about flexibility of transition to the next class or the possibility of repeating years, or the flexibility of age of starting formal schooling if 'developmental readiness' is the order of the day? Where is the consideration for the wishes of individual parents and the needs of the individual child? How does this apparent consideration for educating young children square with getting mothers out to work and providing state education at ever younger ages?

Who is examining the entire National Curriculum for Key Stage 1 with a view to making it compatible with transition from the Foundation Stage? When will anything be done about it? How are ordinary teachers to find out what progress is being made in discussions about such issues at the highest levels whilst they struggle to reconcile the latest pushes from the early years 'specialists' with hints of approval from Ofsted? How can ordinary practitioners truly participate and be heard in the early years debate? How can parents be heard?

## **Formal vs informal teaching**

There is increasingly a climate of 'bashing' any activities traditionally associated with 'formal' education, including sitting down at tables, providing a table space for all children to be able to sit simultaneously, rehearsing handwriting with regular pencils, using worksheets, learning basic literacy skills such as phonics, copy-writing and recording. Advisers are displaying a clear neurosis about 'outdoor learning' and nowadays Foundation Stage children have to be out as much as (or more than) in, with scant regard, it would seem, for the British climate and the cold blowing in through the constantly open doors! I think all children would benefit from more outdoor learning and activities but within reason.

David Bell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, said on BBC breakfast television (19 May 2004) that some children in Year 1 were not developmentally ready for formal teaching whilst he noted that some Foundation Stage children were. He linked 'formal teaching' with 'reading and writing' which is particularly worrying. Is he proposing that teachers should assess which children they believe to be developmentally immature and then refrain from teaching them to read and write until they appear to be ready? Whilst Ofsted's observations and recommendations in their official reports are a step in the right direction, I would suggest that David Bell's casual comments are not. We need to define what we mean by 'formal' and we need to clarify that early literacy and numeracy learning largely require *direct instruction*, but that this can be as fun and child-friendly as the individual teacher makes it. To select by maturity or developmental levels whether children should be taught to read and write is the thin end of the wedge of creating and exacerbating special educational needs for the future,

especially with no flexibility in the length of time children can remain in the Foundation Stage or Key Stage 1.

Who is representing those teachers, early years practitioners and parents with a *different* point of view and challenging statements such as those akin to David Bell's and the following statement expressed by researcher Mary Jane Drummond in her article '*Blighting Early Growth*' (Report, ATL, April 2004)?

*"And this is where the bad news begins. We saw educators with other priorities than the quality of children's learning. For example, we saw an exaggerated emphasis on the very smallest building blocks of literacy and numeracy: initial letter sounds, keywords, counting, number recognition. We saw much less emphasis on children learning to act as experienced readers and writers, relishing books of every kind, responding to texts in a variety of ways, with empathy, understanding and imagination."*

If ever there was a whole language bias, this seems to be it. What qualifies Drummond to denigrate educators who provide basic skills activities with a value judgement that they have "*other priorities than the quality of children's learning*"? Has Drummond considered the possible consequences of an over-emphasis on '*learning to act as experienced readers and writers*' before the children have been taught basic skills? Is she truly knowledgeable about the research on reading and the consequences when children end up guessing their way through books and picking up bad reading habits and reflexes from trying to emulate the behaviour of 'experienced readers and writers' without sufficient tuition in the alphabetic principle? How much easier it is to respond to texts with 'empathy and understanding' if the children learn to decode them properly for themselves.

Professor Greg Brooks's report on the DfES phonics seminar (2003) touches upon the issue of the age of starting formal/compulsory education. He spends time referring to studies which imply that earlier starting ages ultimately result in lower levels of reading ability and may well create or exacerbate the gender gap, before he mentions that various synthetic phonics studies have *actually* reduced, eradicated or reversed the gender gap despite (or because of?) starting synthetic phonics literacy teaching at the age of four (pp. 9-10, '*Sound Sense: the phonics element of the National Literacy Strategy. A report to the Department for Education and Skills*,' July 2003). Many argue that such systematic phonics teaching is 'formal' (therefore not in keeping with current thinking for the Foundation Stage) no matter how others try to describe its appropriateness for younger children as evidenced by the very success levels themselves. Should practitioners and headteachers *have* to justify whether such basic skills activities are formal or otherwise? Who has properly defined what 'formal' teaching is and where is the specific evidence that this is necessarily detrimental to children?

Strange that in an earlier report Brooks immediately follows his comment "*Recent discussion in Britain, sparked off by a Channel Four Television Despatches programme in January 1998, has focused on the early start to formal education, and the possibility that this is unsuited to a minority of children*" with the comment "*It may also be that initial teaching methods in Britain and New Zealand fail to unlock the mystery of the written code for some children. It has been said, for instance, that New Zealand schools predominantly use a 'whole language' approach in which attention to the phonological aspect of language, and therefore to phonics, receives less emphasis than the meaning of texts by which children are learning to read.*" ('Analysis of the Reading Literacy study carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement cited on p.36, Comparing Standards: The Report of the Politeia Education Commission, 2000.) This description of whole language teaching in New Zealand

sounds worryingly similar to the type of practice preferred by Drummond in the Foundation Stage. How influential are people like Drummond and will such opinions undermine the gains made in direct-instruction phonics teaching? Sadly, there are indications in some quarters that this is the case.

And why is it that at no time did Brooks use the terminology of ‘whole language’ or ‘mixed methods’ in his 2003 phonics seminar report for the DfES, neither did he urge scrutiny of the NLS training materials and training programmes to define the true nature of the National Literacy Strategy reading instruction as requested by the Reading Reform Foundation? This was despite the criticism of creditable researchers and others. In other words, even where events are arranged ostensibly to facilitate educational debate, I would suggest that there is no true voice for people other than those in authority such as the DfES, Ofsted and QCA and various people who have made a name for themselves, presumably such as Mary Jane Drummond. What chances have ordinary teachers of expressing their opinions with any influence? And how can we trust experts who appear to be selective in their comments according to the circumstances, or who promote only their own belief systems without regard to either research or different points of view, or who appear to shield the official position from criticism?

Personally, I DO think that the infant curriculum should be less formal – or perhaps less *onerous* is more to the point. The timetable is overloaded with different subjects. Expectations of work standards and behaviour should be high but work *content* needs to be addressed to encourage teachers to bring their own creativity and imagination into their teaching, which in turn should lead to greater creativity for the children. The National Curriculum needs to be more flexible and less burdensome – perhaps its statutory status needs to be removed. Many children are flagging in the afternoons and the curriculum needs to take this practical fact into account. I would also suggest that the appropriateness of teaching RE to infants be reassessed and the demands of focusing on ICT need to be relaxed.

Teachers *do* need more time to read books aloud and foster that love of books to which so many educationalists refer, developing children’s social skills, speaking and listening skills and enriching vocabulary as a priority. If we could guarantee that this would not be confused with children receiving a whole language or mixed methods approach to reading and writing, then phonics would arguably not need to be started as early as four although many children thrive on phonics at this age. Synthetic phonics teachers are not pushing for an ever earlier start to ‘formal’ education, just for *evidence-based* teaching. Teachers need to be very clear about the best methods for teaching early literacy when it comes to the children’s own basic skills and no children should be left to flounder because of an educational philosophy. But children *are* being denied the best education: as I have argued, in Newsletter 51, even the authors of the NLS and members of the DfES are in denial about the conclusions of research on reading. And they are certainly blustering this way and that, making a dog’s dinner of who should teach what, how, when, to whom and to what effect.

We could do with a clean slate, a much simpler approach to early years teaching and assessment, a strong voice for teachers and parents, and more of that transparency and accountability that is sorely lacking in high places.

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## Snippets from the USA

- Studies by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development have used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to observe the brain activity of children between the ages of 6 and 9 who at first struggled with reading and were then remediated. Their brain patterns were abnormal before they were remediated, but became like those of good readers once the remedial teaching had been given. The instruction had strong components in phonemic awareness and phonics. There is a recent easy-to-read book on the subject by Dr Sally Shaywitz, one of the leading researchers in the field: *Overcoming Dyslexia*, published in 2003 by Alfred J. Knopf in New York. What is not yet clear from this work is whether this kind of teaching, if given from the very beginning of school, could prevent abnormal brain activity from ever occurring in the first place.
- In March 2004 on the internet, 'Insight on the News' posed the question 'Is phonics-rich instruction, as pushed by the White House, needed in U.S. classrooms?'. Prof. Ken Goodman (University of Arizona) starts his reply 'No. The whole-language method really works and has led to a golden age of children's literature'. He follows this with an admission that many readers of *Insight* might 'strongly believe that I am wrong when I say that my research shows that written language develops in much the same way as oral language', but nevertheless continues to defend whole language. Prof. C. Bradley Thompson (Ashland University, Ohio) starts his response to the same question 'Yes. The fad of whole-language teaching has led to widespread illiteracy among U.S. students'. He cites the whole-language contention that if children are immersed in rich literature 'they will learn to read naturally, as though by osmosis'. Thompson gives three reasons for regarding this claim as 'false and dishonest': 'children do not learn to read in the same way as they learn to speak' (all human societies have developed spoken language but many have not developed written language); 'it is a colossal fraud to suggest that 6-year-old children can discover on their own something as complex as the English writing system'; 'it is not true that whole-language teachers immerse children in "quality" literature. Whole-language reading books are some of the most vulgar and infantile ever written in the English language'. Thompson quotes Goodman's definition of reading as a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' and asks 'How would you like to be flown by a pilot ... who looks at his instruments and confuses the similarly shaped words 'attitude' and 'altitude'?'

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The next Newsletter is due out in October. Contributions are invited – articles and letters from practising teachers are particularly welcome. All material should be sent to the editor before mid-September. Ideally, contributions should be sent as MS Word attachments to [jennifer@rrf.org.uk](mailto:jennifer@rrf.org.uk), but they can also be sent by snailmail to Mrs J. Chew, The Mount, Malt Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20 9PB.

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## Stop Press

A Newsletter reader has reported that a course on spelling which she attended in late April suggested that the National Literacy Strategy may be moving towards a more sensible type of phonics teaching. We hope to include more details in a future Newsletter.

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### **Reading Reform Foundation Committee Members:**

Geraldine Carter	David Hyams	Ruth Miskin
Jennifer Chew OBE	Sue Lloyd	Fiona Nevola
Mike Goodwin	Dr. Bonnie Macmillan	Daphne Vivian-Neal
Sarah Groszek	Prof. Diane McGuinness	Dr. Joyce Watson
Debbie Hepplewhite		

### **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.**

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