

Newsletter no. 55

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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 were concerned about the high functional illiteracy rates among children and adults in the United Kingdom and in the English-speaking world.

On the basis of a wealth of scientific evidence, members of the Reading Reform Foundation are convinced that most 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 government departments become accountable for the effectiveness of the educational programmes they promote
- disseminate information through a newsletter and website on an ongoing basis.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Many thanks to all those who have sent subscriptions and some very generous donations since the last Newsletter. Further reminders will be sent out, where appropriate, with the next Newsletter.

NEXT ISSUE OF RRF NEWSLETTER

The next Newsletter is due out in November 2005. Please send contributions no later than the middle of September, by e-mail to jennifer@chew8.freemove.co.uk or by post to Mrs J. Chew, The Mount, Malt Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20 9PB. Subscriptions should be sent to the same address.

EDITORIAL

The major event since the last Newsletter has been the publication of the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee's commendable report *Teaching Children to Read*. It deals fairly with the issues, strongly recommends the DfES 'to commission a large-scale comparative study, comparing the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) with "phonics fast and first" approaches', and outlines some good points for investigation: for example, 'the effect of mixing phonics instruction with other methods of teaching, compared to "phonics fast, first and only"', 'how long any gains afforded by a particular programme are sustained', and 'the effect of teaching texts which go beyond a child's existing knowledge of phonics compared to that of limiting instructional texts to those within a child's current decoding abilities'. It also recommends that the study should 'measure and compare attainment by means of standardised testing and not Key Stage test results', and should 'measure attainment in all components of literacy (word recognition, reading comprehension, narrative awareness etc.)'.

The Education and Skills Committee seems to recognise that there are differences between 'synthetic phonics' and the phonics in the National Literacy Strategy, in spite of being told on 2 March by Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education, that 'We do teach synthetic phonics, it is at the heart of our approach'. She conceded on that occasion that the NLS was 'not a pure synthetic phonics approach'. Not long afterwards she told the House of Commons 'We have a synthetic phonics strategy in our schools – it is called the national literacy hour. We introduced it in 1998 and its approach is now almost entirely based on synthetic phonics' (Hansard, 21 March 2005, Column 607). Such statements make it sound as though synthetic phonics is much more prominent in the NLS than it really is.

The term 'synthetic phonics' was brought to prominence in Britain by the Clackmannanshire study, and it would seem reasonable to make the Clackmannanshire version the basis for further discussion. The Clackmannanshire report describes synthetic phonics as 'a very accelerated form of phonics that does not begin by establishing an initial sight vocabulary ... With this approach, before children are introduced to books, they are taught letter sounds. After the first few of these have been taught they are shown how these sounds can be blended together to build up words (Feitelson, 1988) ... The children are not told the pronunciation of the new word by the teacher either before it is constructed with magnetic letters or indeed afterwards; the children sound each letter in turn and then synthesise the sounds together in order to generate the pronunciation of the word. Thus the children construct the pronunciation for themselves. Most of the letter sound correspondences, including the consonant and vowel digraphs, can be taught in the space of a few months at the start of their first year at school. This means that the children can read many of the unfamiliar words they meet in text for themselves, without the assistance of the teacher'. The NLS diverges from this at a number of points: in teaching sight words, in introducing books before sounding and blending skills are in place, in recommending that teachers pronounce words-to-be-read before the children sound and blend them, in extending the teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondences far beyond the first few months of school, and in recommending strategies other than sounding and blending for the reading of unfamiliar words. Can two approaches diverge as much as this and yet both qualify as 'synthetic phonics'? The RRF thinks not.

Even more important than agreeing on terminology, though, is establishing which features of teaching produce the best results in practice, regardless of whether or not we call the resulting package 'synthetic phonics'. The recommendations of the Education and Skills Committee have in fact highlighted some key differences between NLS practice and what the RRF regards as true 'synthetic-phonics' practice. A study which investigates these differences should go a long way towards establishing what kind of early reading instruction is most effective. We can only hope that this study will be undertaken efficiently and without delay.

Jennifer Chew

REVIEW OF TRAINING FOR *PLAYING WITH SOUNDS*

Elizabeth Nonweiler

Derek Twigg, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for School Standards at the time, has stated, ‘Through the National Strategies the Government has always been clear that early and direct instruction in synthetic phonics is critical to the effective teaching of reading ... Schools are free to select the phonics programme that best suits their needs. However, we expect that the selected programme would at least match the quality, standards and expectations in the National Strategies’ publications *Playing with Sounds* and *Progression in Phonics*.’

I maintain that the training for *Playing with Sounds* that I attended did not at all promote instruction in synthetic phonics as I understand it: that is, ‘no initial sight vocabulary where words are learnt as whole shapes ... systematic, fast-paced, comprehensive introduction to letter/s-sound correspondence knowledge ... putting the correspondence knowledge to immediate use with all-through-the-word blending for reading and segmenting single-sound units all-through-the-spoken-word for spelling; no guessing words from picture, context or initial letter cues’ (Introduction to the Reading Reform Foundation web site 2005 by Debbie Hepplewhite, www.rrf.org.uk). The emphasis in the *Playing with Sounds* training was instead on the importance of phonological awareness preceding any learning about letters.

Playing with Sounds, published in 2004, provides guidance for practitioners and teachers working with children in the Foundation Stage and Year 1. As Lesley Drake and Debbie Hepplewhite have already written a thorough review of the content of *Playing with Sounds*, my focus is on the training provided by my local authority. I attended this three-hour training session in September 2004. It was run by a literacy consultant and an early-years consultant.

In the introduction to the training we were told that since *Progression in Phonics* was published in 1999, there has been a great deal of research and ‘they’ve learned a lot’. Power Point slides showed some good points about teaching phonics, including, among a list of phonic skills, ‘segmentation and blending’. Another slide showed phonics as one of four strategies in the Searchlight Model. We were told, ‘Phonics is one of the strategies. Children can pick from a range of strategies’. This is in conflict with Greg Brooks’s advice in his 2003 report to the DfES that teachers must teach children explicitly when to switch from one searchlight to another: ‘Teachers must therefore never assume that children are attending to more one of the focuses in the searchlights model at a time, and must teach children explicitly when to switch from one searchlight to another; for example, if a child manages to identify a word from the context, the teacher should immediately switch the child’s attention to decoding the word (if it is sufficiently regular) in order to reinforce the message that decoding is a more powerful way of identifying words accurately (and reduces the memory load)’.

The literacy consultant then said that there is a problem in KS2 when phonics is missing. She explained that children can get by in the early stages with contextual skills, but after a while they have to be able to decode. She was asked, ‘Why not teach children how to decode from the start?’ and she said she would answer that later. She never did.

The early-years consultant explained to us that *Playing with Sounds* is different from *Progression in Phonics* because of the new emphasis on the early steps. Also, vowels are introduced earlier, so that we can introduce verbal blending and ‘break down a word’. The literacy consultant then said that phonics should be the key focus of word level work and she briefly mentioned the use of letter fans and mini whiteboards for segmenting and blending.

Next we were given an overview of the cards that form the substance of *Playing with Sounds*. The cards begin with activities for children working within the Stepping Stones (Early Foundation Stage). It was explained that the pink cards relate to children at the end of the Foundation Stage and moving into Year 1 and the yellow cards to children already in Y1. Although the yellow and pink cards introduce some letter/sound correspondences earlier than the National Literacy Strategy, this was not discussed.

We moved on to the main focus of the training, which was about making sure children are ‘phonologically aware’ before they are shown letters. The importance of this was stressed again and again throughout the training. We were told that without a range of experiences of playing with sounds, children ‘cannot move forward’.

These are some of the activities it was suggested we do with children:

- Hide a music box and ask the children to find it.
- Blow whistles, ring bells and ask the children to perform different actions according to the sounds.
- Ask the children to hop and skip to different sounds.
- Read a familiar story. Say, for example, ‘When I say the word frog, you say sausages’.
- Choose three instruments. Play a sequence. Ask a child to repeat it.
- Chant the rap, ‘When Long Tall Sally went walking down the alley ...’
- Sing a rhyme. Have a puppet steal a word. The puppet squeaks and the teacher is silent at the word. Children fill in the missing word.
- Pass a pebble as you say rhyming words in rhythm.
- Make a collection of rhyming things to match. Give a child an object. Ask: Can you find a rhyming one to match?

To develop alphabetic knowledge, the children can:

- Look for plastic letters in water.
- Make letters with Playdoh.
- Match letters to an alphabet strip – ‘and don’t forget to do it outside!’

After lots of experience of such activities, the teacher should introduce verbal blending.

- Speak like a robot, e.g. h-a-t. Ask the children what the word is.

So far, letter-sound correspondence was not part of the activities. At this point in the training, the literacy consultant said, ‘Look how long it’s taken to get to sound symbol association! Once they’ve reached a level of sound awareness, they’ll be ready’.

Letter-sound correspondence can then be introduced through activities such as:

- Show a letter, e.g. ‘r’. Pass round a parcel. Ask, what could it be? Guess, e.g. *ruler, rubber*. Open the parcel. It’s a rabbit!
- Place a letter next to an object with that initial letter sound.

We were told to teach first initial then final sounds and then medial vowel sounds.

Here are some statements made by the early years and literacy consultants:

- ‘It’s important that this doesn’t come first’ – pointing to a bullet point with the words, ‘Learn the letters and letter combinations most commonly used to represent these sounds’.
- ‘The key message is that focused phonic teaching can be done through play, games and activities.’
- ‘Playing with sounds is a fantastic phrase. Without playing with sounds, children can’t understand [how to read]’.
- ‘Rhythm is important.’
- ‘Beat is really important because it helps children to hear parts of sound.’
- ‘If they can’t repeat a sequence on three musical instruments ... how can they do it with sounds?’
- ‘Note the word: orally’ – pointing to a slide about phonological awareness. ‘Nothing as a symbol, nothing written.’
- ‘We know you can take six months before teaching children about letter/sound correspondence. If they don’t have the previous learning, children can’t do it ... It’s obvious. If you spend time first on oral awareness, they will be ready to learn.’

We were shown two CDs for practice in reading phonetically. One CD was called ‘Cartoons for Children’ and included material with incorrect punctuation. We were told it came with a ‘health warning’ and that we should ‘use the resource and adapt it’. The other was ‘Phoneme Spotter Stories’ with text for reading phonetically. We were told to use this one cautiously too.

There was no advice about how to teach letter/sound correspondence beyond that described above. The role of reading books and how to introduce them was not addressed at all. A teacher hoping for clear guidance about how to teach children to use knowledge of sounds to read and write will have been disappointed.

How can Derek Twigg suggest that *Playing with Sounds* is part of a strategy of ‘early and direct instruction in synthetic phonics’? How can Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, say, ‘Synthetic phonics is a large part of what the National Literacy Strategy is about’ (Minutes of Evidence taken before Education and Skills Committee, 2 March 2005)? The overriding theme of the training was the promotion of a philosophy of oral work and play before letters.

The literacy consultant told us, ‘Listen to and play with sounds. That’s really important. When I started teaching, I went straight into letters and sounds. Now I’m mortified ... I didn’t know then what I know now’. What is it she knows now that can justify this delay in introducing children to the alphabetic code?

With the best structured programmes of synthetic phonics, children are taught in one term all forty-plus phonemes of the English language, with the letters most often used to represent them, and how to blend them to read words. They do not have to wait until they have spent months becoming ‘phonologically aware’.

References

Brooks, Greg, 2003. *Sound sense: the phonics element of the National Literacy Strategy A report to the Department for Education and Skills*, July 2003, p.22

Drake, Lesley, and Hepplewhite, Debbie, 2004. 'Take the letter shapes out of the water and the word cards out of the sand – Review of *Playing with Sounds: a supplement to Progression in Phonics*'. *Reading Reform Foundation Newsletter* 53.

Twigg, Derek, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for School Standards. Letter written to David Rendel MP, March 2005.

Information about *Playing with Sounds: A Supplement to Progression in Phonics* can be found at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/literacy/948809. An Adobe version is at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/literacy/948809/nls_phonics028004intro.pdf. The DfES reference is 0280-2004.

CONQUER DYSLEXIA: FELICITY CRAIG

Newsletter 54 included a review, by Mona McNee, of Felicity Craig's book *Conquer Dyslexia – Without Losing the Gift*. Felicity Craig has asked that the following response be published.

I have great respect for Mona McNee. She has battled tirelessly, over many years, to reinstate the teaching of good phonics in our primary schools. She has written a manual for parents, *Step by Step*, which has sold thousands of copies, and of course she pioneered and edited the *RRF Newsletter*, again for many years. She has never given up, despite numerous setbacks. Now at last the results from Clackmannanshire have helped to vindicate what she has been saying all along – that the thorough and speedy teaching of phonics is essential for the development of literacy.

But I have to say that I was very disappointed by her review of my book *Conquer Dyslexia – Without Losing the Gift*, in *Newsletter* 54. She has quite ignored its central thesis, and as a result many of her comments are illogical. So, in justice to myself, I feel I have to try and set the record straight.

The heart of my book is an analysis of how language functions. I begin with spoken language, because it is much easier to see two entirely different processes at work. We all learn to understand speech, to begin with – to hear meanings in a variety of spoken words and sentences. Then we learn to reproduce words ourselves; and we figure out how to do this accurately by mapping our vocal sensations, bit by bit, on to the patterns of sounds coming into our ears.

I was excited by my discovery of Glenn Doman's book, *Teach Your Baby to Read*, in the sixties, not so much because of his methods, but because he was pointing out that we learn to see meanings in written words in the very same way that we hear meanings in spoken words. So understanding print is exactly comparable to understanding speech – which is why babies can do it.

However, Doman's book doesn't go nearly far enough, and that is why it didn't solve the problem of reading failure in America. I believe my own original contribution in the field is to show that mapping uttered words on to written words, bit by bit

(phonics), is exactly comparable to mapping uttered words on to heard words, bit by bit, when we learn to speak. (Think about it.)

It's an enormously useful process. It isn't the same as seeing meanings in written words, but it enables a child to *transfer meanings from speech to print*, so that (as Ruth Miskin explains in *Newsletter 54*), he can teach *himself* to understand the written words.

It also enables a reader to transfer meanings from print to speech (a point often overlooked on both sides of the literacy debate). He learns to understand words by reading them, works out how to say them, and therefore vastly increases his spoken vocabulary. (I would hazard a guess that I probably learned the meanings of about three quarters of the words in my adult speaking vocabulary by reading them first. Occasional mispronunciations can often be an indication that this process is taking place.)

So I do not, not, *not* advocate 'mixed methods', as Mona McNee seems to think. (I don't know what I have to do to get this across.) I am advocating two entirely different methods of teaching *two entirely different processes*. I am saying that we can give children abundant experience of seeing meanings in written words. Alongside that, and just as fast, we teach all children to map uttered words on to written words, bit by bit, thoroughly and systematically, blending the sounds as they go along. (They also write the words in my phonics programme, sounding them out while they write.) As soon as they have learned the procedure, we make sure they have abundant experience of reading aloud accurately, until that is automatic and instinctive, and they can mentally combine the two processes (which is what most of us do as adults).

The last chapter in my book, 'Why are schools getting it wrong – and how can they get it right?' is very critical of Frank Smith, Kenneth Goodman and Liz Waterland, but you wouldn't guess that from Mona's review. Like Doman, Waterland (author of *Read with Me*) got hold of only half the picture – and she explained that so badly that generations of teachers, following her lead, contributed to the massive incidence of reading failure which is now such a blight on our educational system. Smith, Goodman and Waterland subscribe to the peculiar idea that children learn the meanings of new written words by 'guessing' or 'predicting' – even though that is precisely *not* how children learn to understand new spoken words. I *never* ask children to guess or predict. At first, I simply tell them what a new word means, until they can sound out all words by themselves.

I am hoping that my thesis about the workings of language will finally enable us to heal the breach between the two sides (whole language and phonics) in the ferocious literacy battle. It is such an unnecessary battle, and it has such tragic consequences. Test figures will certainly help to convince teachers that they need to change their outlook (and I am hoping East Lothian will trial my phonic programme in many more schools over the coming years). But by themselves, test figures are not enough. Liz Waterland's approach has spread so widely because she did have hold of a piece of the truth (that written words can convey meanings without any necessary reference to spoken words), and teachers could sense this. We have to show them how phonics fits into the picture, how it works, what it is for, and how it can be taught, very rapidly and systematically, *alongside* the process of understanding print. Then, at long last, we will be able to bring about total literacy, for all children, whatever their handicaps might be, in less than a year.

Conquer Dyslexia explains just how such a goal can be achieved. I had hoped that Mona McNee would appreciate this in her review, but maybe she didn't have time to read the book properly. However, I have received numerous letters from parents and grandparents who *have* grasped what I am saying, and are delightedly helping their children to succeed, no matter what the schools are doing. Maybe you will have to make up your own mind – and let me know what you think.

Conquer Dyslexia – Without Losing the Gift, ISBN 0 9520937 1 5, is available from any bookshop, or directly from me, price £12.95 including postage. Please include payment with order, or an official order form.

Felicity Craig, One-to-One Publications, 33 Newcomen Road, Dartmouth, Devon TQ6 9BN.

Editor's comment: As Felicity Craig says, the thesis at the heart of her work is that written language functions exactly like spoken language and that 'we learn to see meanings in written words in the very same way that we hear meanings in spoken words'. It is because she felt that Mona McNee had ignored this central thesis that she wanted the above response to be published.

A problem for many of us, however, is that if her central thesis means what it seems to mean, then it is incompatible with the conclusions of the many authorities who contend that learning about written language is very different from learning about spoken language. Perhaps, however, she does not mean exactly what I have always understood her to mean since I first encountered her work many years ago, in which case her theory may be quite compatible with the conclusions of these authorities. Another possibility is that she is right and the other authorities are wrong. All this has to be thought through if she insists that her central thesis should not be ignored. But might it be easier for us to judge her approach on its practical merits and results if she were less insistent about this?

Of the authors whom Felicity Craig herself frequently cites (Glenn Doman, Liz Waterland and the philosopher Susanne Langer), Doman is the only one who strikes me as holding anything like her views on learning 'to see meanings in written words in the very same way that we hear meanings in spoken words', and on the relevance of this to reading instruction. Doman's evidence is anecdotal, however, and his book, as its title (*Teach Your Baby to Read*) indicates, is entirely about very young preschoolers learning on a one-to-one basis with parents, not about classroom instruction. Langer talks only about spoken language, not at all about written language. Although Waterland's 'apprenticeship' approach certainly involves a lot of reading aloud to school-age children as they follow the print, I can find nothing in her influential 1985 book *Read with Me* to indicate that she subscribes to the view that Felicity Craig attributes to her: that 'written words can convey meanings without any necessary reference to spoken words'.

In *Conquer Dyslexia – Without Losing the Gift*, Felicity Craig tells us that results from one school (Longniddry Primary School in East Lothian, Scotland) are good, though she gives no figures showing exactly *how* good. Above, in her response to Mona McNee's review, she tells us that she is hoping that East Lothian will trial her phonic programme in many more schools over the coming years. It is to be hoped that results will be reported, as these will count for far more than theoretical considerations.

JOLLY PHONICS IN THE GAMBIA, WEST AFRICA PART ONE

Marj Hitching

‘Aay, Bee, Cee, Dee’, chanted 56 five-year-old Gambian children from the blackboard, but if the letters were pointed to randomly, they could not correctly say their ‘alphabet letters’. This had been the way for several years but this May, two days after some teacher training, I heard ‘sssssssss’ and ‘aaaaaaaaa’ and ‘ttttttttt’ coming from a classroom and saw the appropriate actions. **Jolly Phonics had arrived at Wellingara Community Nursery School, in The Gambia!**

It had been a long process to introduce phonics (synthetic or otherwise) at this school for 435 three- to seven-year-olds. I first went there in February 2001 when I was still working as an Adult Literacy tutor. A friend had set up a registered charity to support the then small, cramped but growing school. I went to see for myself and came home eager to get involved. I became one of the Trustees of ‘1 to 3 – supporting education and welfare in the village of Wellingara’ (pop. 17,000)

I was nursery trained, had worked in special education for over 20 years and taught adult literacy. As a widow with grown-up children, my life turned yet again and I am now totally involved with this wonderful school.

When I first saw the rote teaching I wondered what to do – one cannot just go in and say that their teaching methods are ineffective, but during one of my now twice-yearly visits with the founder-chairman, I talked to staff about introducing phonics. At first I came up against ‘But dis is d’ way we do it in d’ Gambia’ (big trouble with /th/), but by taking things slowly I won the staff round and I found one or two other schools ‘doing’ phonics (mostly analytic I think).

Before my next visit the deputy had been impressed by a demonstration of phonics teaching during a course and this turned out to be *Jolly Phonics* (in a small, privately-funded school). I then heard of another school teaching *Jolly Phonics* from the Handbook only. I arranged to visit there during our April/May visit and was impressed with the resourcefulness of the head teacher, Abdul Newlands. This greatly encouraged me, as I had serious concerns about how to fund the project, but I had useful advice from Chris Jolly and Sue Lloyd and already had the Presentation Pack and Starter Kit, most of which I took to Gambia, hoping not to be charged for excess baggage!

The teachers, classroom assistants, bursar, children’s sponsorship scheme social worker and community co-ordinator all took part in two days’ training, and to my great relief, but not surprise, were very enthusiastic. We laughed a lot, especially when I explained about cuckoo clocks and when the staff acted out ‘ee – or’.

A special feature was that the electricity was on *all day* – very unusual! It may have had something to do with the letter taken by a child’s grandfather who worked for the company, saying *please* could we have the power on from 9 till 4 on Saturday and Sunday – it worked!

The staff will be visiting the school run by Mr Newlands, and I’ve left instructions on how to continue the training themselves. I plan to go out again before the start of next term and be there when Jolly Phonics officially starts. But, they couldn’t wait – hence

the sounds of /a/ instead of ‘aay’, /sssss/ instead of ‘es’ and /tttt/ instead of ‘tee’, coming from the classroom!

Marj Hitching is Trustee/Secretary of 1 to 3 Registered Charity 1082151. Part Two of the story will follow, we hope, after her next visit to The Gambia.

SNIPPET FROM AUSTRALIA

Australia is in the process of a national inquiry into the teaching rather like the one which has recently taken place in England. Submissions closed at the end of April. According to an article with the headline ‘Psychology dominates reading debate’, in *The Australian* of 2 May 2005, the Australian Psychological Society’s submission to the national inquiry stated that ‘an accumulation of evidence now unequivocally shows that systematic phonics instruction is essential for effective reading’. *The Australian* also refers to the findings of the Clackmannanshire study. In Australia, it seems, as well as in the UK, the role of psychologists in determining the most effective teaching methods is being increasingly recognised. The need for such recognition was stressed by Dr Morag Stuart in her evidence to the parliamentary Education and Skills Committee on 15 November 2004.

TEACH YOUR GRANDCHILDREN TO READ

We have been sent a booklet with the above title by the author, Thomas Wood. The booklet is dated 1996 and contains some useful ideas for phonics teaching, including the suggestion that it is helpful if the first consonants to be introduced are continuants (those such as /m/ and /s/, where the sounds can be held on to for as long as one has breath). The booklet is sensible in recognising that in the situation where grandparents are working with grandchildren, the children are likely to be very young and therefore to be ready to learn to read before they have enough physical co-ordination to learn to write.

Some of us would have reservations, however, about making words such as ‘me’, ‘be’, ‘we’, ‘no’, ‘go’ and ‘so’ the basis for the very first lesson. For one thing, there are relatively few words where the long vowel sound is represented in such a simple way, and for another thing, those of us who have worked a lot with children know the hoary old problem of getting them out of the habit of treating every vowel letter as ‘saying its name’.

Nevertheless, this is a short and simple booklet which grandparents and parents may find useful. No price is given, but enquiries can be made to Thomas Wood at thwood@freeuk.com.

Language Development and Learning to Read: The Scientific Study of how Language Development affects Reading Skill – a new book by Diane McGuinness, published in June 2005 by MIT Press.

**JOLLY PHONICS AT BURSCOUGH VILLAGE PRIMARY SCHOOL,
ORMSKIRK, LANCASHIRE**

Liz Hawksby and Norma Mudd

Liz Hawksby writes:

As a reception-class teacher for many years, I have used various strategies in the teaching of reading. When it was proposed to introduce the *Jolly Phonics* scheme at our school three years ago, I had some reservations. We had become increasingly aware of the problems some children were experiencing in learning to read, and although phonics played a part alongside reading schemes, it had not been the main focus of learning. When the materials arrived, we were rather dismayed by their 'dated' appearance, and were also sceptical about whether we could introduce a letter-sound each day and keep the momentum going.

However, we were agreeably surprised at how well the children responded, and in about eight weeks we had covered all 42 sounds, including those represented by digraphs such as 'ue', 'ng', 'ie', 'ee', etc. The storyline and the actions have proved to be great fun for the children. They participate enthusiastically in all aspects, including forming letters by 'sky-writing', and they enjoy using other related materials. They particularly like showing off their skills to the rest of the school in work-sharing assemblies! The scheme involves parents through homework sheets and word-blending lists and the feedback has been excellent.

We have introduced a phonics-based reading scheme in the early stages to allow the children to transfer smoothly from learning sounds, through blending, to reading. We have been delighted with the results, and by the end of Reception we have the majority of the class confidently blending words and enjoying reading.

Dr Norma Mudd writes:

I have been Literacy Governor at Burscough Village Primary School, where Liz works, for eight years now, and during this time have also led seven groups of parents in obtaining accreditation as 'Parents as Educators' (Literacy). These parents have been able to help their own children with reading, and also help children in school who have difficulties in learning to read.

As Literacy Governor, I would like to add several comments of my own to Liz's account of the *Jolly Phonics* programme. The first relates to Liz's references to the children's use of phonically-based reading schemes. After consultation with Debbie Hepplewhite over three years ago, the school decided to use 'Sound Start' readers, published by Nelson Thornes. The *very* early readers include words such as the following: 'Rob', 'Pen', 'Ben', 'help', 'Mum', 'and', 'Dad', 'yes', 'went', 'up'. Very gradually, the books introduce and repeat sight words such as 'the', 'go', 'to', 'my', 'like', etc. Thus the children are able to use their phonic and blending knowledge immediately. The advantage of such phonic books is obvious when we consider the words that are introduced so quickly in, for example, the *Oxford Reading Tree* scheme (Oxford University Press), which is popular in many schools. Stage 1 books contain pictures only, which encourage child/adult discussion, but early in Stage 2, without necessarily being secure at decoding, children encounter tricky words such as 'couldn't', 'about', 'was', 'fight', 'downstairs', 'dolphin', 'dreamed' (all in *The Dream*), and 'no', 'go', 'car', 'they', 'were', 'couldn't', 'walk', 'home', 'children',

‘worse’, ‘light’ (all in *The Foggy Day*). Needless to say, many children’s inability to blend letters is masked, since they use other strategies to ‘read’ the books such as memory recall after being read to by an adult, and/or guessing by looking at the pictures. So unless children have good blending skills, we may have ‘fight’ read as ‘hit’, ‘wanted’ read as ‘went’, ‘told’ read as ‘read’, etc. Children in our school transfer to the *Oxford Reading Tree* scheme only once they are reading/blending well.

Recently, the Headteacher, Gill Serjeant, ordered sets of Ruth Miskin’s readers (written by Gill Munton): these promise to be very good indeed. In each reading book, the first pages introduce adults/children to the sounds to be encountered in the book and also to words which cannot be blended. These words are printed in red throughout the books; for example, one of the Stage 2 books introduces children to ‘the’, ‘of’, ‘to’, ‘no’, and ‘my’, as well as to words which are phonically regular. Examples of sentences in early books are ‘Dan is in his tip-up truck; the tip-up truck is full of mud’, with ‘of’ printed in red.

My second comment relates to the brief screening tests which are carried out at Burscough Village Primary School in Year 1 after children have been at school for four terms. These very informal tests check children’s knowledge of letter-sounds and blending ability. Thus any children still experiencing difficulties in letter-sound recognition and blending are identified early and given help individually, both in class with teachers and support staff, and out of class by the trained volunteer parents. It should be noted that the proportion of children still experiencing difficulties has been very small since the introduction of *Jolly Phonics*.

This year, we also administered the brief informal test of letter-sound knowledge and blending knowledge to children still in reception (they had completed two terms in school) to detect anyone who needed some extra help. The results show that out of sixteen children in Reception, twelve children (75%) knew nineteen letter-sounds or more, and this included eight children who knew all 26 letter-sounds. Similarly, thirteen children (81%) were able to blend CVC words with confidence, leaving only three children (19%) who needed extra help.

Finally, I also write as someone who met Mona McNee (founder of the United Kingdom chapter of the Reading Reform Foundation) in the mid-1990s. At that time, I was a college lecturer and Organiser and Tutor in Adult Literacy; because of the latter role, I, like Mona, had successfully taught many novice readers. However, we disagreed upon the part played by guessing in the reading process. Mona’s often-repeated statement, ‘guessing is a terrible thing’, seemed to me to be *too* extreme, particularly since I encouraged my adult beginners to make guesses based on the context of a passage and then to check their guesses against the visual display. However, the more I work with *very* young novice readers, the more I can see how guessing can be a very negative strategy for them.

Mona and I have, over the years, established a good relationship. I greatly admire the way she has argued for and maintained her beliefs over many years. Truly a tough and determined lady!

Dr Pauline Dixon (University of Newcastle) has e-mailed the BBC in connection with the Newsnight series on phonics to say that the children using *Jolly Phonics* in the slums of Hyderabad made 13 months’ reading progress in 6 months. (See also RRF Newsletter 53).

RESEARCH DIGEST

Jennifer Chew

Longcamp, M., Zerbato-Poudou, M-T., Velay, J-L., 2005. The influence of writing practice on letter recognition in preschool children: A comparison between handwriting and typing. *Acta Psychologica* 119 (2005) 67-79. Working in France, the authors ‘trained two groups of 38 children (aged 3-5 years) to copy letters of the alphabet either by hand or by typing them’. The training lasted for only one and a half hours spread over three weeks, so it was not a full-blown literacy programme. The researchers found that ‘in the older children, the handwriting training gave rise to a better letter recognition than the typing training’. The same training was ‘not efficient for the children younger than fifty months’, however, possibly because they were less cognitively mature or because they lacked the fine motor control necessary for forming letters. One might conclude that enthusiasm for getting primary-school children in the UK and elsewhere on to computers may not be helping their literacy development – it would be better to give them practice in writing letters by hand.

SNIPPET FROM NEW ZEALAND

In an article in *The New Zealand Herald* of 19 April 2005 about the proposal to give parents remedial reading vouchers enabling them to buy extra tuition for their children, Prof. Tom Nicholson wrote the following:

‘Reading vouchers are necessary at this time as an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff to rescue many thousands of children who will slip through the cracks of our educational system and whose lives will be ruined because of lack of literacy.

‘But this is a short-term measure. The real problem is that schools are saddled with the whole language reading method that fails too many children and that excludes other methods such as phonics.’ [Emphasis original]

As Lesley Drake commented on the RRF Message-Board: ‘I can’t help but think this is a bit crazy. The government pays for schools to teach children to read. They don’t do the job, so the government pays parents to take their children somewhere else to be taught how to read. So the government pays twice for the same service. Why not just get rid of the doctrine that causes teachers to fail to do the job they are employed to do in the first place?’

1955 –2005: 50 YEARS ON FROM RUDOLPH FLESCH

This year sees the 50th anniversary of the publication of Rudolph Flesch’s book *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. The book was a best-seller for nine months after it was published. Flesch pinpointed the lack of good phonics teaching as the overwhelming reason for reading failure. Sadly, his book *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read*, which appeared 16 years later in 1981, was only too justified, but his friend on the board of Harper Row had retired; Harper Row was selling a reading scheme of its own, so they gave minimum support to his second book, and when he looked at his contract, it forbade him advertising it himself! He was very disillusioned about this. He died in October 1986. Were he still alive, he might feel that Johnny’s prospects had improved a little.

RESPONSE TO *PHONICS PhAQs* – FREQUENTLY-ASKED QUESTIONS FROM LEAs

Jennifer Chew

A document with the above heading was circulated to LEAs, apparently in March 2005. This document contains some disturbingly questionable statements.

It claims that the phonics in the NLS is as effective as the phonics in the Clackmannanshire study ‘if it is done properly’, as in ‘schools that follow a systematic approach as suggested in *Progression in Phonics*’. But it bases this claim on the assumption that achieving Level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 test is exactly equivalent to achieving at or above chronological age level in the particular standardised test of comprehension used in the Clackmannanshire study – the Macmillan Group Reading Test. In fact, however, this equivalence has not been demonstrated. In a letter which I wrote to Ruth Kelly on 14 March 2005, I mentioned the performance of the Clackmannanshire children on the Macmillan test and asked, ‘Is it known that NLS teaching produces better comprehension scores among comparable children on this test?’. I also mentioned the Clackmannanshire children’s spelling score on the Wide Range Achievement Test. The reply which I had from the DfES, dated 19 April, stated, ‘We do not administer these tests so we don’t have any national information about the performance of children taught through NLS approaches on these particular tests’.

Phonics PhAQs recognises the same problem, stating that there are ‘issues to be resolved over the comparability of National Curriculum test scores and tests which produce reading ages’. How, then, can it state in the very same sentence that ‘the current 83% figure for the number of children achieving at or above their chronological age in reading seems to compare well with the results in this study’? If there are ‘issues of comparability’ (and there *are*), the comparison simply should not be made. The fact is that there is no foundation for official claims that children reaching Level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 tests are comprehending as well as, or better than, the Clackmannanshire children. The reverse is more likely, as one would expect the Macmillan test to have been restandardised if it were true that 83% of eleven-year-olds were ‘achieving at or above their chronological age in reading’.

Another problem with the *Phonics PhAQs* document is that its definition of ‘analytic phonics’ does not tally with the definition in the Clackmannanshire study. There is of course always some latitude in the way that things are defined, but if a judgement is to be made about whether the phonics in the NLS is or is not like the ‘analytic’ phonics in the Clackmannanshire study, then it is the Clackmannanshire definition which should be used. With analytic phonics as defined in this study, children are taught about grapheme-phoneme correspondences systematically (rather than learning about them incidentally ‘by deduction ... from texts’, as suggested in *Phonics PhAQs*), but

- (a) more slowly than in synthetic phonics programmes,
- (b) usually only after text-reading has begun, and
- (c) with the emphasis at first only on letters and sounds at the beginnings of words.

(a) and (c) seem true of the NLS, and (b) seems at least partially true – text-reading in the NLS may not begin *before* the teaching of letter-sound correspondences begins, but the two certainly seem to proceed in tandem. Press reports which ‘equate the

analytic phonics used in the Clackmannanshire study with the approach to phonics in the Strategy', far from being 'entirely incorrect' as *PhAQs* states, may be quite close to the mark.

Phonics PhAQs states, 'Phonics in the Strategy is fundamentally synthetic – it teaches children to hear and segment the sounds in a spoken word and shows them the letters for those sounds so that they can spell the word. It also teaches blending so that children can read words using the letters they have learned'. The order here reflects the way that the original NLS publications and subsequently *Progression in Phonics* and *Playing with Sounds* have placed more emphasis on segmenting for spelling than on blending (synthesising) for reading.

PhAQs continues, 'However, in the course of reading and spelling, children who have understood that words consist of letters which represent phonemes, will deduce information about words independently. Once a child has understood that the same letters can be used in different words and that these correspond to the sounds they [*sic*] hear in words, they can attempt to read and spell more advanced words than those in the phonics programme. The Strategy would want to encourage this problem solving behaviour. In that sense it also endorses analytic phonics'. It needs to be noted, though, that analytic phonics, as defined in *Phonics PhAQs*, does not have a monopoly on this type of grapheme-phoneme-based problem-solving – synthetic phonics encourages it, too.

The type of problem-solving behaviour which synthetic phonics does *not* encourage is the use of grammar, context and pictures for word-identification purposes. This type of problem-solving *is* encouraged by the NLS, according to Dr Kevan Collins's reply to Q248 in the Education and Skills Committee session on 8 December 2004: 'What the child does is they bring the four aspects of the searchlights to bear. They bring their knowledge of phonics to get the first consonant ... They use other information – the context, maybe the picture, the evolving story. They use their syntactic knowledge, the kind of grammar and pattern of English, and they use their graphic knowledge'. This sanctioning of word-identification which is not grapheme-phoneme based seriously weakens Ruth Kelly's claims on 2 March and 21 March that 'synthetic phonics is at the heart of our approach' and that the literacy hour approach 'is now almost entirely based on synthetic phonics' (see Editorial of this Newsletter).

All in all, then, this *Phonics PhAQs* document does not seem to give a very accurate account of the NLS's position in relation to the Clackmannanshire study.

SNIPPET FROM WEST BERKSHIRE

Kevan Collins, National Director of the Primary National Strategy, is quoted, in the Summer 2005 Newsletter of the West Berkshire Special Needs Support Team, as saying: 'The Clackmannanshire study is an endorsement of the emphasis placed on phonics by the National Literacy Strategy and provides statistical evidence of the effectiveness of phonics on literacy attainment for both girls and boys'. The fact is, however, that the Clackmannanshire approach has completely closed the gap between boys and girls, whereas the NLS approach has not. This difference, together with others highlighted in the *PhAQs* article above, means that the Clackmannanshire study cannot be taken as an endorsement of the NLS type of phonics.