

Newsletter no. 59

Autumn term 2006

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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.

NEXT ISSUE OF RRF NEWSLETTER

The next Newsletter is due out in February 2007. Please send contributions no later than the middle of January, 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 address on the back of this Newsletter.

EDITORIAL

The big event since the last Newsletter has been the RRF conference, which took place in London on 3 November 2006. This was a great occasion: we had some excellent presentations, and there were good opportunities to get to know people during breaks. This Newsletter is being given over largely to summaries of the presentations, although we are delighted also to be able to include an article by the authors of the Clackmannanshire study and an article by Elizabeth Nonweiler on the Carriacou project. DVDs should soon be available of the conference – details will be posted at www.rrf.org.uk and will also be given in the next Newsletter.

Another significant event has been the publication of some ‘core position papers’ on the Department for Education and Skills website in early September. These papers present a picture which is very largely in accordance with synthetic phonics thinking: for example, they stress the importance of the ‘simple view of reading’ – a view which makes it clear that the teaching of decoding is paramount in the early stages. Comprehension is not neglected at this point, but it does not need special teaching, as children already understand spoken language quite well enough to cope with the simple texts they will encounter in their early reading. It is only later, when they are more proficient at decoding, that they should start encountering texts which contain vocabulary and sentence-structures which go beyond what is orally familiar. At this stage, they have finished ‘learning to read’ and are ‘reading to learn’, and comprehension (not only of written language but also of spoken language) becomes more of an issue.

It remains to be seen how faithfully the recommendations of the Rose Review will be implemented. The training of Primary National Strategy consultants will start in December 2006, with a strong focus on the ‘simple view of reading’. The kitemarking of commercial programmes is due to start in the spring of 2007, and that is also when a new government programme for the teaching of early reading should appear. In the meantime, some worrying reports have been heard of schools being steered away from commercial programmes – this seems out of keeping with the Rose report, given the degree to which the Rose team members were impressed by what they saw of commercial programmes during school visits. We understand, however, that the DfES is taking this problem seriously, and we hope that no more negative comments will be made about commercial programmes.

There are also reports of new projects which are based mainly on the Early Reading Development Pilot (ERDP), and these, too, may cause RRF members some concern (see Newsletter 58, p. 16). The ERDP’s main messages were, first, to confirm that starting phonic work by the age of five was helping, not harming, the children and, secondly, that taking time to teach phonic work at this stage did not distort the early-years curriculum. We welcome these findings, but we remain concerned that the ERDP was no more than ‘action research’, and that its outcomes were apparently not evaluated by means of any kind of test which would allow comparison with standards of reading and spelling reported in more rigorous academic research studies. This was in spite of the fact that the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, with the Clackmannanshire study particularly in mind, strongly urged the DfES ‘to commission a large-scale comparative study’ which should ‘measure and compare attainment by means of standardised testing...’. The ERDP appears to have been that study, but it used no standardised testing.

The children in the ERDP were in Reception and the DfES evidently decided that standardised tests were inappropriate at this stage. Instead, it used its own statutory measurement device, which is the Foundation Stage Profile. The RRF would point out, however, that the ‘simple view of reading’ in itself implies a need for some objective measurement of word-reading (and spelling) at the end of Reception. As this ‘simple view’ is now the official basis of early literacy teaching, and as it holds that the prime need of beginners is to learn to decode, it would seem appropriate to have proper measurement of early decoding skills from now on to check that they are as good as they ought to be.

Jennifer Chew

**FACT AND FICTION ABOUT THE SYNTHETIC PHONICS STUDY IN
CLACKMANNANSHIRE**

**Rhona Johnston, Department of Psychology, University of Hull
Joyce Watson, School of Psychology, University of St Andrews**

Since our study of synthetic phonics in Clackmannanshire (Johnston and Watson, 2004) has been widely discussed, though perhaps not widely read, a remarkable number of myths have been circulating.

Hall (2006, page 12) argues that in our research in Clackmannanshire ‘analytic phonics was set up for failure’. Actually, as we are scrupulously careful researchers, our very first study set out to find out exactly how analytic phonics was taught. Definitions of analytic phonics are rarely very explicit; below is one of the more detailed ones that we have found.

“Gradual Analytic Method.

The gradual analytic method initially presents the student with a list of words that become part of his sight vocabulary through visual memory techniques. Subsequently he is taught to analyse these words by identifying certain common sounds that appear in them. For example, the sight words milk, man and mother are shown to the child, who is asked if he sees anything about these three words, he then ‘reads’ them. The teacher cautions him to listen to the sound he hears at the beginning of each word. ‘Whenever we see this letter, “m”, in a word, we will hear the sound that we hear at the beginning of milk and man. Can you think of some other words that begin the same as milk and mother?’ The proponents of the analytic method contend that it keeps decoding as part of the reading act, since the sounds are never isolated but are always taught within the context of the word and perhaps the sentence.” Harris, L.A. and Smith, C.B. (1976)

On pages 10 and 11 of the report on our longitudinal study (Johnston and Watson, 2005) we described our observations of classroom practice in 12 classes in Scotland teaching by the analytic phonics approach, starting in 1992. The programme started by teaching letters in the initial position of words, at the pace of one letter sound a week. In all but one class, this took 26 weeks to complete, generally around March of the first year at school. Children were then taught about the importance of letters in the final position of words, and then in the middle, at which time sounding and blending of CVC words could commence. At this point, we found that independent reading skills really took off. The pace and progression in analytic phonics teaching that we observed was common practice throughout Scotland at the time (and is similar to how schools implemented *Progression in Phonics* in England). It was the observation that independent reading skills were very much better in the class where one teacher took a faster approach, introducing sounding and blending much earlier, that led us to study synthetic phonics.

In our second study, carried out in 1995, children learning by the normal classroom analytic phonics approach received extra phonics tuition for 10 weeks in small groups outside the classroom, having two 15 minute sessions a week (Johnston and Watson, 2004). One group of children learnt by the synthetic phonics approach, learning letter sounds at the pace of two a week. A second group also learnt two letter sounds a week, following an analytic phonics programme. As this was the first term of school, these letters were learnt at the beginning of words. In the third group, the children received the same new print word exposure as the other two groups, but had no phonics teaching additional to the classroom analytic phonics programme. By

Christmas of the first year at school, the synthetic-phonics-taught children read significantly better than the other two groups, and also knew more letter sounds (even though the analytic phonics group had learnt letter sounds at the same rate). The intervention ended at this point, but the children were followed up until the start of their second year at school. By this point, the children had all been taught in their classroom phonics programme to look at letters in all positions of words (Johnston and Watson, 2004, page 352). Despite the fact that the classroom programme had reached the sounding and blending stage, the synthetic-phonics-taught group was reading around 11 months ahead of the accelerated analytic phonics group. Thus despite the fact that our intervention in Clackmannanshire (see below) was terminated before the stage where sounding and blending is used in analytic phonics programmes, our evidence from the earlier study suggests that the children taught this way were very unlikely to have been able to catch up with the children taught synthetic phonics.

In our third study of phonics, carried out in Clackmannanshire starting in 1997, we again compared the effectiveness of analytic and synthetic phonics teaching (Johnston and Watson, 2004), this time delivered on a whole-class basis. The children in the analytic phonics condition followed a systematic scripted daily classroom programme based on the observations in the first study of how analytic phonics was typically taught. As the 16-week intervention ended in February of the first year at school, the children had by that time learnt 16 letter-sounds at the beginning position of words. As we had established in Study 2 that speed of letter learning in itself was not a factor in accelerating learning to read, the children in the synthetic phonics group received a programme delivered at the typical fast pace of such programmes. They covered letters and letter sequences for the 40+ sounds in the English language in 16 weeks. At the end of the programme, these children were reading 7 months ahead of the analytic phonics group, and had much better phonemic awareness skills. However, both groups had been exposed to the same new print vocabulary.

The children in all conditions read text from early on, starting on reading scheme books just 6 weeks after the programme started, contradicting the idea that all synthetic phonics programmes advocate covering the 40+ sounds before the introduction of reading for meaning. Much is made of the fact that the synthetic phonics programme in Clackmannanshire led to much greater increases in word reading and spelling skill than in reading comprehension, implying that reading comprehension did not benefit from the intervention. However, it should be noted that at the end of the seventh year at school, reading comprehension in the study was significantly above age level, in a sample that had a below average SES (socio-economic status) profile.

It has been claimed that other interventions were being carried out in Clackmannanshire at the time of our study, which could have led to better results for the synthetic phonics condition (Ellis, 2005). At the time of our study, home-school liaison officers were appointed in four of the study schools. However, two of these were in schools in the synthetic phonics condition, and two were in an analytic phonics condition, so these appointments cannot account for the gains found with the synthetic phonics programme.

The DfES-funded Torgerson et al (2006) review of the effectiveness of reading programmes chose to carry out a meta-analysis only of studies that had random allocation to conditions. It is not clear why a study that received so much public funding (around £70,000) only undertook a partial review of the literature. Like two-thirds of similar studies in the literature, the Clackmannanshire study did not have

random assignment of schools to conditions. As random allocation was not possible, the schools from the most disadvantaged areas were allocated to the synthetic phonics condition. This is a tough test of the effectiveness of synthetic phonics, as children from areas of deprivation do less well in reading than those from better-off areas from the very first year at school (Stuart et al, 1998, Duncan and Seymour, 2000). The National Reading Panel (2000) and Camilli et al. (2003) reviews looked specifically at whether studies having random assignment to conditions led to different outcomes from those studies that did not (the majority of the literature). Neither review found that this made any difference. Similarly, our second study, carried out in 1995, did have random allocation of children to conditions, and the Clackmannanshire study replicates the findings of that earlier study.

The two previous reviews looking at the effectiveness of reading programmes scrupulously excluded all unpublished studies. Therefore another singular feature of the Torgerson (2006) review is that one of the three studies they include that compares analytic and synthetic phonics conditions is an unpublished study, delivered at a conference in 1971. This study found no advantage for synthetic phonics teaching. As a peer-reviewed article has not appeared on this study in 35 years, it suggests there is something wrong with it. There is indeed a major flaw – the synthetic phonics programme was not correctly implemented. The kindergarten children were taught to sound and blend words like 'tape', an approach which would lead to an incorrect pronunciation of the words. In synthetic phonics schemes such items are taught much later on, when phonic rules are taught.

Interestingly, the detractors of the Clackmannanshire study have not attempted themselves to demonstrate that their preferred method yields as good or better results than a synthetic phonics programme. Their method seems to be to merely attack the Clackmannanshire study and thereby imply that the approach that they advocate is as good or better, without collecting any supportive data.

In sum, any piece of research, particularly one that has had such a wide influence, should indeed be subjected to close scrutiny. However, looking at all the points that have been raised about the study, it is clear that there is a desire in some quarters to denigrate the work by slur and innuendo, without actually producing any evidence that contradicts the findings of the studies carried out.

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REPORT ON THE READING PROJECT IN CARRIACOU AND PETITE MARTINIQUE

SEPTEMBER 2006

Elizabeth Nonweiler

Introduction

Teachers in Carriacou and Petite Martinique have now begun to use synthetic phonics teaching methods with their students. This is the first report about the progress of the project. A proposal written in July of this year explains the background and provides details about aims and long-term plans.

Meetings with Representatives of the Grenadian Government

A meeting was held on Friday 24th August at the Ministry of Education in Grenada between Mr Martin Baptiste, Chief Education Officer, and Mrs Elizabeth Nonweiler, Project Leader, to discuss the project. On 5th and 6th September, Mrs Andrea Phillips, Curricular Development Officer for Language Arts and Caribbean Centres of Excellence for Teacher Training, and Mrs Elizabeth Forsyth, a reading specialist from the Education Ministry, visited Carriacou to meet Mrs Nonweiler, Mrs Gertrude Niles, the Education Officer for Carriacou and Petite Martinique, and Mrs Susan Godsland, an assistant trainer for the project, to further discuss the project and to observe some of the training. These meetings provided a valuable opportunity to exchange information and explain relevant issues.

Training and Workshops

The purpose of the training was to tell teachers in Carriacou and Petite Martinique about synthetic phonics teaching methods and to support them in implementing these methods in their schools. The trainers were Mrs Nonweiler, Mrs Godsland and Mrs Maggie Downie. Training included workshops and visits to schools, to explain teaching principles, describe and demonstrate methods, and discuss issues.

Teachers of children in Pre-Primary 2 and Kindergarten (four- and five-year-olds) were trained in the use of *Jolly Phonics* and given daily lesson plans for the first twelve weeks of teaching. Teachers of children in Grades 1 to 6, and teachers of secondary-school students with reading difficulties, were shown how to structure lessons according to *Sound Discovery's* 'Snappy Lesson'. It was stressed, however, that synthetic phonics teaching is not dependent on commercial programmes, and all teachers of students from Pre-Primary 1 to secondary school were also told about a

range of activities and resources to help teach reading and spelling. Donated materials were distributed and teachers were shown how to use them.

Some of the training was repeated several times, as not all teachers attended the initial workshops. Mrs Niles oversaw the training, and Miss Michelle Coy, Reading Specialist for Carriacou and Petite Martinique, attended the workshops for primary schools.

Details of Training

Date	Topic
Monday 28 th August	Synthetic phonics teaching principles for Primary and Pre-Primary teachers
	How to prepare children for reading for teachers of Pre-Primary 1 (three-year-olds)
	Initial teaching of reading for teachers of Pre-Primary 2 (four-year-olds) and Kindergarten (five-year-olds) – the <i>Jolly Phonics</i> programme
Tuesday 29 th August	Initial teaching of reading for teachers of Pre-Primary 2 and Kindergarten – lesson plans, resources and assessment
Wednesday 30 th August	Moving on and helping children who have problems with reading for teachers of Grade 1 and 2 children
	Initial teaching of reading for teachers of Pre-Primary 2 and Kindergarten – shortened training including lesson plans
	Extending reading and spelling skills for all children, and helping children who have problems with reading, for teachers of Grade 3, 4, 5 and 6 children
	Helping students with reading and spelling difficulties for the secondary-school teachers who teach reading and spelling to these students
Thursday 31 st August	Supporting all students with reading and spelling during normal lessons, for secondary-school subject specialist teachers at Hillsborough Secondary School
	Helping students who have problems with reading for volunteer helpers
Tuesday 5 th September	Meeting with primary school principals – overview of training, and questions
	Short meeting with Mr Lendore, principal of Hillsborough Secondary School, to discuss practical implications
Wednesday 6 th September	Training of Pre-Primary and Kindergarten teachers at Mount Pleasant School, observed by Mrs Phillips and Mrs Forsyth
	Individual training for Kindergarten teacher at Hillsborough Government School
Thursday 7 th September	Visit to Petite Martinique to observe implementation of synthetic phonics and answer questions
Friday 8 th September	Making and using resources for Pre-Primary and Kindergarten teachers
	Training for Pre-Primary and Kindergarten teachers and one Grade 4 teacher

Monday 11 th September	Short meeting with Ms Quamina, principal of Bishops College Secondary School, to discuss practical implications and to arrange a short training session for subject specialist teachers
	Visit to L'Esterre School: training for Pre-Primary teachers, demonstration lesson for Grades 1 to 6 teachers
	Parents of Pre-Primary and Kindergarten children at Mount Pleasant School: explaining synthetic phonics and how to support their children
	Parents of Pre-Primary and Kindergarten children at L'Esterre School
Tuesday 12 th September	Visit to Harvey Vale School: meeting with school principal, training and demonstration lesson for Pre-Primary and Kindergarten teachers
	Parents of Pre-Primary and Kindergarten children at Hillsborough Government School
Wednesday 13 th September	Visit to Dover School: demonstration lesson for Bogles Pre-Primary teachers and Dover Kindergarten teacher; demonstration lesson for Grades 1 to 4 teachers; discussion and training with Grades 5 and 6 teachers
	Brief visit to Winward Pre-Primary
	Supporting all students with reading and spelling during normal lessons for secondary school subject specialist teachers at Bishops College
	Parents of Pre-Primary and Kindergarten children at Dover School
	Parents of Pre-Primary and Kindergarten children at Harvey Vale School
Thursday 14 th September	Visit to Hillsborough Government School
	Visit to Day Care Centre in Hillsborough – request from staff for training

Progress and Assessment

Assessment has two distinct purposes, which are to inform teaching and to report progress. Assessment plans as described in the project proposal have not been strictly adhered to in every school, as this has proved difficult to explain or carry out in some circumstances.

Formative Assessment

For the initial teaching of reading, all teachers have been asked to use the daily lesson plans for the first twelve weeks. No formative assessment is necessary at this stage. After this and before moving on, children's knowledge of the alphabet code and their blending and segmenting skills will be assessed, in order to decide which children need extra practice in the skills taught.

It was suggested that the *Sound Discovery* placement test be used to place children in Grades 1 to 6 in groups according to their word reading skills. In the secondary schools, teachers have used their usual assessments to decide which students most need daily lessons to improve their reading skills. For both groups, the placement test is to be used to decide at which stage of the *Sound Discovery* programme teaching should begin.

Assessment to Report Progress

For reporting purposes in September 2006, it is most important to assess the children beginning Kindergarten, who spent a year in Pre-Primary 2 in 2005/06. This is because the reading skills of children who have had a year in Pre-Primary 2 in 2005/06 can then be compared with those of children who have had a year of synthetic phonics teaching in Pre-Primary 2 in 2006/07. This will provide comparative evidence about the effect of the implementation of synthetic phonics teaching methods on the islands.

The Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA) is to be used to measure and report annual progress. The purpose of using NARA in September 2006 is to establish a baseline from which to measure progress. However, it is expected that many children in Kindergarten will find NARA too difficult. To decide which children should attempt it, they are to be assessed first using the Burt Word Reading Test. Any children who score ten or more on this test are to attempt NARA.

NARA can also be used to establish a baseline with those children in Grades 1 to 6 and in secondary schools who have been identified as having reading difficulties and who are to be taught daily using synthetic phonics teaching methods.

Mr Baptiste suggested that the results of the NARA tests could be compared with the results of the Caribbean Centres of Excellence for Teacher Training (CETT) assessment.

The Schonell Spelling Test is easy to administer to whole classes and provides a baseline for assessing spelling, and so it was suggested that all children in primary school, and secondary school students with reading difficulties, should attempt this test. It is not suitable for children in Pre-Primary classes.

Future Monitoring and Support

Mrs Niles and Miss Coy will continue to monitor and support the project on the islands, Mrs Nonweiler has offered support and advice by email, and teachers have been told about the websites, www.rrf.org.uk and www.syntheticphonics.com, where they can write messages asking for advice from synthetic phonics experts and from other teachers world-wide. Mrs Nonweiler will return to train and advise according to need, in October and December 2006, and again in June 2007. Details of monitoring and support for the following years will be planned later.

Responses to the Training

Responses to the training have been both thoughtfully critical and overwhelmingly positive. Enthusiasm has grown since teachers have begun to use the methods in their classrooms and have noticed the responses of the students they teach. Parents' sessions were well attended.

There have been some challenges. A very few teachers, in particular those who missed part of the training, have been anxious about changes to the methods they have been used to. In contrast, other teachers have been keen to get started, but have found it difficult without their own copies of resources. Teachers in Grades 1 to 6 have asked for further information about the *Sound Discovery* programme. This information is available in the manuals donated to the islands, and permission was given to make copies for each school. However, it is not easy to photocopy and bind so much material. Solutions are being discussed. Sharing *Jolly Phonics* materials between Pre-Primary and Kindergarten classes calls for careful timetabling and home-

made copies of some of the resources such as a frieze of a basic code, and in a few situations this has been difficult.

Conclusion

Enthusiasm, commitment and team-work have resulted in an excellent and exciting start to the project. Combined with a highly effective teaching method, this means that the project is set for success. Progress will be regularly reported.

APPENDIX

Donations to the Reading Project

We are grateful to the following people and organisations that have contributed finances, resources, services and time to this project.

Mr Peter Allan
Mr Reynold Belmar, Petite Martinique Gas Station
Mrs Janine Bosley
Mr Bernard Bullen, Bullens Enterprises
The British High Commission
Mrs Geraldine Carter
Mrs Jackie Day
Mrs Maggie Downie
Flexitable Ltd
Mrs Susan Godsland
Ridgehill Publishing
Hills & Valley Chemist
Professor Rhona Johnston
Jolly Learning
Mr Edward Kent
Mrs Sharon Koor
Mrs Emma Logan
Mr Paul Maskell
Mrs Eileen Measey
Mr Laurence Measey
Mrs Mendes, Carriacou Lotto
Mr Chris Mills, Carriacou Regatta
nferNelson
Rev Otis Nichols, The Anglican Church in Carriacou
Mrs Gertrude Niles, Education Officer for Carriacou and Petite Martinique
Mrs Elizabeth Nonweiler
Ms Lyn Ostick
Rt. Hon. James Prior
The Promethean Trust
Mrs Janet Seaton
Mr Jerry Stewart
Steill Family, Hillsborough Deli
SVG Air

Our thanks to all of those concerned with education in Carriacou and Petite Martinique – principals, teachers, parents and volunteers – for their willingness to put time and effort into work to improve the reading skills of local school children.

RRF CONFERENCE 3RD NOVEMBER 2006

Before the start of the scheduled proceedings, Mona McNee spoke very briefly. She had started the UK chapter of the RRF in 1989. She felt that the Rose report had given us a wonderful chance of getting things right. The social and other consequences of *not* getting it right are very serious.

The first speaker, Jim Rose, was then introduced.

THE ROSE REPORT: THE CHALLENGES POSED BY THE REPORT AND RESPONSE TO ITS RECOMMENDATIONS

Jim Rose, CBE

Jim Rose started by saying that Mona McNee used to harass the life out of him when he was in the inspectorate and that he was very glad that she had. We are now in the business of moving forward. Literacy is a universal goal, both nationally and internationally. We all agree on the *end* that we want, which is for children to read and write well – what we now need to concern ourselves with is the *means* to that end.

The debate has sometimes been very rancorous, and this can paralyse action, so that teachers are left unsure about the importance of phonic work in general and systematic synthetic-phonics work in particular. We have been in this state for far too long. There must be an entitlement to literacy for every child. The government's target is to reduce inequality at the earliest possible stage. We are never out of the political arena because of issues of resources and funding. The game we are now in is 'quality, quality, quality'. [This was related to Tony Blair's statement in 1997 that Labour's priorities were 'education, education, education'].

The review had five aspects:

- Expectations for best practice in early reading and synthetic phonics
- Relationship to revised NLS *Framework for Teaching* and the new EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage)
- Best provision to help children with significant literacy difficulties catch up
- Impact of leadership and management, and practitioners' subject knowledge and skills
- Value for money/cost effectiveness of different approaches.

There had not been time to go into detail on the value-for-money question, so the review team had looked at it largely in terms of training.

Jim Rose himself had been given a fully independent position in responding to the remit for the review. The reason for the review was that the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), which later became part of the Primary National Strategy (PNS), was due for revision. It was recognised that a better model of reading was needed. There was also an EYFS consultation in progress at the time; the foundation stage starts before statutory schooling begins but continues into the statutory period.

The major parties are marching in step on these issues. The parliamentary Select Committee took evidence from a number of people, and would have been even more convinced if they had got out and about more. The Rose team *had* got out and about: its members had done some 'serious visiting of schools' to see what worked well. They had also looked at a wide range of research.

There was concern about the slowing of progress on achieving national targets. The National Curriculum had been introduced in 1989 but had had very little impact on standards of reading and even less on writing. The differences between boys and girls, and between children from advantaged and disadvantaged homes, seemed to be widening.

In 1998, when the National Literacy Strategy was introduced, 65% of Year 6 children reached Level 4 in the Key Stage 2 tests. By 2005, the figure was nearly 80%, but in 2006, progress for English seemed to have stalled. In actual numbers, some 90,000 children at the end of Key Stage 1 (age 7) and 96,000 children at the end of Key Stage 2 (age 11) are not reaching national targets for their age. Against this background, in the best interests of children, we need to continue to win hearts and minds in favour of high-quality phonic work embedded in a high-quality curriculum. It is not enough to simply deliver a report – the hard work starts now in delivering its recommendations.

There is no doubt that views of phonics have changed radically. Opposition to phonics goes back a long way. Jim Rose quoted two 18th-century writers. One described phonics as ‘A droll way of teaching’, ‘Senseless playing with sounds’ and ‘mere fiddlesticks’, while another described it as ‘a greater prejudice than the burning of witches and heretics; indeed it is a greater crime than the rack and all the inhumanities lumped together... It begets stupidity, illness and death itself. It is child-torture – a slower and surer child-murder’!

Nowadays, systematic phonic work is accepted on the basis of robust research: ‘These findings show that systematic phonics instruction produced superior performance in reading compared to all types of unsystematic or no phonic work. Phonics instruction is systematic when all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences are taught in a clearly defined sequence’ (USA National Reading Panel, Ehri 2003).

Jim Rose pointed out the importance of oral language development – the development of speaking and listening – in the early years to pave the way for systematic phonics teaching and develop language comprehension. Principled professional decisions have to be made about when to start systematic phonics, but there was plenty of evidence from observing good practice to show that the majority of children benefited from starting on such a programme by the age of five.

He was attracted to the ‘simple view’ of reading: comprehension of a text obviously depends on being able to read the words on the page. The ‘simple view of reading’ quoted in his Review explored how word recognition and language comprehension processes are related.

He posed three questions:

1. Why did the National Curriculum not raise standards of reading and writing as expected?
2. What gave rise to the surge in standards during the seven years of the NLS?
3. Why are standards now stalling?

Jim Rose suggested the following answers:

1. The National Curriculum did not win the hearts and minds of primary teachers. ‘Instruction’, as a term, was often disapproved of, especially in the early years. The prevailing view tended towards view that ‘child-led’ activity was good and ‘teacher-led’ learning was not so good.

2. The NLS *did* secure more structured teaching, but things do not change overnight – teachers ‘hedged their bets’ by using a mixture of methods. Some children ‘caught on’, probably because of commercial schemes – but the Rose team sometimes saw poor use of good schemes. For example, there was particular inattention to the skill of blending.
3. The stalling probably occurred because we had reached the limitations of the ‘searchlights’ model. Jim Rose quoted the 2002 OFSTED report which stated that this model ‘has not been effective enough in terms of illustrating where the intensity of the searchlights should fall at different stages of learning to read. While the full range of strategies is used by fluent readers, beginning readers need to learn how to decode effortlessly, using their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and the skills of blending them together’. The ‘searchlights’ model confounded decoding and comprehension.

The ‘simple view’ of reading should take us forward, but it will not do so unless teachers understand it. We need to train well and monitor progress – we owe it to children and parents to do so. ‘We’ll never get away with lack of accountability – nor should we.’

Jim Rose stressed the importance of knowledge and skills. Just as numbers are the ‘alphabet’ of maths (they just have to be taught and learnt), so, too, the knowledge and skills needed for reading need to be taught and learnt. He mentioned how his grandfather had started teaching him to read in the 1940s, using the words ‘Jim Rose sat on a pin Jim rose’! Parents and grandparents can be an enormous advantage. But what if they can’t help? The school must then do it all.

The features of high quality phonic work are as follows:

- Grapheme-phoneme correspondences [are] taught in a clearly defined incremental sequence
- [the child] blends phonemes all through the word in the order they appear to read words
- [the child] segments words into their constituent phonemes to spell
- short, discrete, daily sessions [are] taught within a broad and rich curriculum
- [the work is] multi-sensory, engaging, enjoyable
- [the phonic work is] *time limited* – the balance changes from ‘learning to read to reading to learn’.

There are different programmes, but they work on similar principles. The final Rose report had stated, ‘The common elements in each [systematic] programme – those that really make a difference to how well beginner readers are taught and learn to read and write – are few in number’.

Given the nature of research it is likely that there will be a continuing robust debate about reading and aspects of phonic work. The Rose team had been impressed as much by practice as by research. Why make it difficult for teachers by overplaying uncertainties in research in a way that makes them ‘keep all the plates spinning’ when one approach is obviously at least as good as, if not better than, others?

The Rose review had implications for training:

- Those who teach beginner readers need to understand the principles of high-quality phonic work, including the simple view of reading
- It is important that initial teacher training institutions (ITT) and other providers ensure that the principles are reflected in their training
- The Primary National Strategy team and the Teacher Development Agency need to undertake joint work to offer support for ITT on the review recommendations.

Jim Rose finished his presentation with a joke about ‘the power of the phoneme’: an extract from a church bulletin which ran, ‘This evening at 7 p.m. there will be hymn singing in the park across from the church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.’

During questions, he mentioned visiting a school in Bristol where boys were reading and writing particularly well and enjoying it. Children were taking pride in the fact that they could read – success was its own reward. A comment from the floor by Marlynne Grant made it clear that this school was St Michael’s (see Newsletter 52) where children have poor language skills on entry. Jim Rose also mentioned that the electronic framework, available since early October, was not perfect in every respect – it *can* be changed. In response to a point made from the floor that Key Stage 2 teachers, as well as KS1 teachers, needed to be trained to teach phonics, he said that the ‘time-limited’ nature of phonic work does not mean ‘turning the tap off’ – ‘all primary teachers need to know why and how to teach it’.

FOURTH TIME AT THE BALL – WILL PHONICS EVER FIND HER MAGIC SLIPPER?

Diane McGuinness

Diane McGuinness based much of this talk on her 2004 book *Early Reading Instruction*. She started by talking about how writing-systems work, quoting from a 900-page book edited by Daniels and Bright and published in 1996, with contributions from leading experts. In the introduction, Peter Daniels defines writing as follows: ‘Writing is a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer.’ Diane pointed out that this means that ‘a writing system is not something that requires the reader to GUESS the meaning of the text, or to ask the creator of this text to explain it.’ Also, ‘writing is bound up with the phonology of a language – not with whole words...whole word pictographs cannot represent abstract ideas, verbs, grammatical inflection, people’s names, and so forth’. Moreover, the human mind cannot remember more than 2000-2500 abstract symbols. Even Chinese writing requires no more than this, as 99% of words can be written by combining 2400 syllable symbols with classifier signs.

Ancient Sumerian writing ‘contained 800 symbols standing for the syllables of the Sumerian language and 60-70 number signs’. It did not develop gradually from picture writing but was invented as a whole. Sumerian clay tablets found by archaeologists also provide overwhelming evidence that the writing system was explicitly taught to children – they were not left to absorb it ‘by osmosis or casual inspection’. The need for direct teaching of a written code was recognised by scholars in all advanced civilizations of the ancient world, but it has been lost sight of by many of those responsible for children’s education in the modern world.

The phonological unit used in for a writing system depends on the structure of the spoken form of the language. When a language has a small number of syllables (as with Chinese and Sumerian), written symbols represent syllables. Most of the world's languages are made up largely of CVCVCV speech patterns (as in the word 'potato'), and CV Units ('diphones') form the basis of the writing systems. The 'GOLDEN RULE' for any writing system is, 'Choose that largest unit of sound (easiest to hear in the speech stream) that fits the language, but doesn't overload memory'.

Diane McGuinness discussed the difference between European languages written with a 'transparent alphabetic code' and those, like English, with an 'opaque' code. In transparent codes, 'each phoneme in the language is coded by one and only one symbol' so simple to learn that that children master the written code in 10-12 weeks and quickly move on to reading proper text. Nearly all children learning this type of writing system learn to decode to a high level of skill. This means that poor decoding (the definition of "dyslexia" in the UK and US) cannot be attributed to 'some type of "brain disorder" or faulty gene'. Instead, the cause is the nature of the English alphabet code and how it is taught.

In view of all the above, 'modern research ought to show that methods which come closest to teaching an alphabet code properly should produce greater gains than methods which do not'. One remarkable study conducted in 1985 by Carr and Evans in Canada showed this by recording 'time on task' for each individual child on 50 occasions per child over several months. They then correlated 'time on task' with each child's reading-test score. They found that 'ONLY three activities were positively and significantly correlated to reading skill: that is, the more time spent on these activities the higher the reading scores were. These are: practice segmenting and blending sounds in words (phonemes), specific phonics activities such as learning letter-sound relationships, and writing words, phrases and sentences, by copying or from memory'. The memorizing of sight words, lessons on vocabulary and grammar and listening to the teacher read showed strong *negative* correlations to reading scores – in other words, the more time children spent on these activities, the poorer their reading test scores were.

Diane then talked about her 'prototype' for teaching reading, which is based on 'what we know about writing systems, what we know about how our code works, and what the classroom studies have revealed'. The purpose of a prototype is to get beyond confusing programme details. The prototype contains the following elements: teach the specific sound units that are the basis for the code (and no other units), teach 'the arbitrary, abstract symbols that represent these sounds', teach that the code is 'reversible', connecting encoding (spelling) and decoding (reading), avoid teaching sight words ('except the few high-frequency words with rare spellings'), teach segmenting and blending in real words *using letters*, expect spelling to be accurate 'or, at a minimum, phonetically accurate', first teach the symbols for the 40+ phonemes of English, and then teach 'the advanced spelling code (the remaining 136 common spellings).' Read 'stories or texts that match what is taught so far'.

'WE KNOW WHAT WORKS. So why is it so hard to fix something that is so obviously not working when we have the solution?' Because the English alphabetic code is so complex, it is tricky to teach UNLESS you are working with a programme that makes this manageable'. There are many good programmes (some of the authors were present at the RRF conference!), but we need university departments of education to give their students the right theoretical knowledge so that they can evaluate programmes properly. More than 100 years ago, people such as Isaac Pitman, A.J. Ellis and Nellie Dale had a good grasp of what should be done, but sight-

word reading schemes took over. After the publication of Rudolph Flesch's book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, in 1955, phonics advocates pushed for change. In the 1960s, large-scale studies were carried out by Jeanne Chall in the USA and by Daniels and Diack in the UK. Bond and Dykstra conducted a huge study, but their analysis was faulty – when Diane herself re-analysed their data, she found that 'there was one clear and unassailable winner – a programme with an uncanny fit to the Prototype'. This was the Lippincott programme, which 'closely resembles many of the good UK synthetic phonics programmes'.

'Today, nearly at the end of 2006, we have another golden opportunity. Will we muff it again? I submit that we need to be highly proactive and demand much more accountability than in the past... With the new government's latest incentive and the publication of the Rose report, the UK is in the position to put things right at last.' If we *do* manage this, the whole English-speaking world will have to follow. We need to establish a Prototype 'specific enough for there to be no confusion about what should and should not be taught, but not so specific that it doesn't allow for programme variations'. We need to 'start a campaign NOW to end any kind of whole word teaching in which children are asked to memorize whole words by sight and guess whole words by context clues'. We need to ensure better initial training for teachers, and to adopt good testing procedures. The government should fund proper studies to compare "phonics" programmes fitting the prototype to "phonics" programmes that do not. Diane sees no purpose, however, in comparing phonics to the failed whole-word methods. She ended by praising the rigorous longitudinal study conducted by Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson as an exemplar of this type of research.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Debbie Hepplewhite

Debbie started by paying tribute to the founder of the UK Reading Reform Foundation, Mona McNee, and others who have informed her over the years. Debbie commented that we are losing many people from the teaching profession who are feeling overwhelmed. She said that the unions were not doing a good enough job and teachers feel so far removed from the General Teaching Council that they do not support it.

Debbie went into infant teaching to find out what was going wrong with literacy standards in good junior schools with good teachers, but when she attended NLS training, she was shocked that trainers were telling her to get children guessing from pictures. Her response was, 'But it's my *weakest* readers who guess'. Subsequently, the biggest aspect which has driven Debbie on has been the attitude of advisers to questions, and she is battling to this day with her local authority. There is no mechanism to hold anyone in authority to account whilst, in contrast, teachers and headteachers feel a great burden of accountability for standards measured in national testing. Are teachers pressurised to be more accountable to the prescription, however, than to the children themselves?

Jim Rose must not be the only one to be 'piggy in the middle' between teachers (many of them disaffected) and 'the people at the top'. We must not compromise our principles of transparency just because we now have the Rose Report and, in any event, the Rose Report may not be well implemented with all the in-fighting between powerful advisers, such as the early years advisers, and the government tendency to always 'tie-in' with past documents.

Debbie stated that being challenging isn't being negative – it's just raising awkward questions. She has challenged local authority advisers and suggests that they need to be more than conduits for government advice. The RRF website has made a big difference, leading to Nick Gibb, M.P., making a major contribution to the debate, but, significantly, he has seen the matter of reading standards as a cross-party issue.

Another person Debbie found to be good at responding when so many 'faceless' people failed to reply to her letters was Keith Lloyd, former OFSTED Chief Inspector for primary schools. He advised that politics and diplomacy needed to be taken into account in the debate, but Debbie replied that she doesn't 'do politics and diplomacy' and argued that they have no place in matters of education and science.

Apart from noting that people in key positions such as in the Basic Skills Agency and the unions were subverting the Rose Report, Debbie also suggested that the government's and Jim Rose's vision is far too small. As had already been mentioned during the conference by delegates, the problem is not just teaching in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 but also at Key Stages 2, 3, 4 and adult education. Debbie felt that we had 'lost the plot' in primary education by telling children their national curriculum 'level' by a number and a letter. This is all well and good if the children are level 4 but what if they are only level 2 as a consequence of 'nature, nurture and the *education system*'?

Debbie related an anecdote about a friend of hers who runs a pre-school and had recently attended some local authority training sessions which had laid stress on evidencing achievement in Foundation Stage profiles. Debbie commented that these need to be simplified and the guidance debated. She quoted a comment from a four-year-old which had been mentioned on the *Times Educational Supplement* on-line forum. The child had said 'The teachers sit over there and write a lot'. The minutiae have become ridiculous. Advisers are saying things such as 'Not everyone agrees with the Rose report – if you don't agree with it you don't have to do it'. There is great irony in the fact that teachers have to provide evidence-based profiles but then are told that they do not have to implement the Rose recommendations when 'the simple view of reading' is heavily evidenced in appendix 1 (unlike the government's previous 'searchlights reading strategies' advice!). Some teachers have to do profiles for 70+ children.

The most challenging schools are put under a lot of formal pressure, when what they really need is informal support. On the TES forum, teachers have been saying that they did what Debbie suggested and it made a huge difference, but that these were individual teachers. St Michael's of Stoke Gifford has achieved marvellous results over a period of ten years.

Debbie held up a 200-page folder weighing 2.1 kg, produced not by the government but by people who could claim great authority like Ofsted inspectors and advisers. There are 18 different weighted 'bands' for tracking progress, and Debbie read a few snippets to give a flavour of the advice. She said she could not describe the contempt she felt for such a development and this had to stop. These children did not yet have to attend school and practitioners, who were not even trained teachers and who got paid only a few pounds an hour, were placed under the same pressure and expectations to complete the same paperwork.

Secondary teachers often don't understand children's problems – they need common ground among themselves in terms of their phonics knowledge. Who takes responsibility for reading and spelling in the secondary schools? When around 60-80% of secondary pupils have weak spelling, surely all teachers should be responsible

for good modelling of the adult skills of reading and spelling? We could have a documentary DVD to educate all teachers ‘at a stroke’ with the government’s access to the media and seemingly bottomless pot to produce glossy manuals.

When Debbie is conducting training, she distributes a handout including two pages of extracts from the Rose report. She gets trainees to put dots beneath non-decodable words. This results in very few dots, but she then points out that what is decodable for these trainees is *not* decodable for children aged 4 and 5 – nor for pupils aged 10, 14 or 16, if they have been left to deduce the code for themselves and consequently have inadequate code knowledge. English is entirely decodable, provided that you know the code. By grouping tricky words such as ‘could’, ‘would’ and ‘should’, children get the point very quickly. So how many *regular* words do they need to see in order to see the pattern? – not many. Simply by grouping the more tricky words by their spellings, these words would become transparent.

Leading people in the RRF do not want Phase 1 as in the new Framework: teachers may wait for Johnny to be good at rhyming and alliteration *before* they start teaching phonics. Nowadays teachers just want to be told what to do – this is a sin. They have lost confidence in themselves because of the degree of prescription. The government rhetoric about personalised learning is nonsense in that we are class teachers of 30 children or more – not personal tutors. Sometimes we just know that Johnny should be in the cohort below – he just needs more time. There is no flexibility in the system, however, for Johnny to go in the cohort below because secondary schools will return Johnny to his original cohort in order to take GCSEs at the correct time. So what happened to gentle transition into secondary schools? If we leave Johnny to play in the sandpit because he is ‘not ready’, then what will happen to him in our inflexible education system?

Where OFSTED is concerned, Debbie believes in accountability, but teachers in struggling schools are being dealt with in the wrong way. There is the possibility of public humiliation with no right to reply – no opportunity to describe the full context as so much is swept under the carpet. Headteachers are trained that they are not ‘good headteachers’ if they look into the issues, support their teachers or raise questions.

The Rose report gives us the chance of a fresh start. The government has lorded it over us and has now realised that it got things wrong. The DfES needs a slot on its own website pointing people towards the RRF even if this does reveal criticism. So what? Open forums are needed and people at the top must not be faceless. People could accept those in authority making mistakes if they were simply more accessible to us. Teachers care so much and the teaching climate must change.

Debbie mentioned Reading Recovery and Catch-Up. There is international concern about Reading Recovery and yet some government departments continue to support Reading Recovery despite the Rose recommendations. The Rose report did not name leading programmes such as *Jolly Phonics* and *Read-Write Inc.*, but Reading Recovery *was* named. It is not acceptable that leading phonics programmes which are based on research and researched in their own right are described in a derogatory manner as ‘commercial’ programmes by Ofsted inspectors and even by Barry Sheerman (Chairman of the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee), when authors such as Sue Lloyd etc. are leading educationalists and have led the way. These programmes have been written because there is a great need for them.

Debbie is not passionate about phonics – she is passionate about justice. She is convinced that if teachers had sufficiently good information that they would make the correct informed choices.

OVERCOMING PREJUDICE

Sue Lloyd

Synthetic phonics teaches children the code *before* getting them to read books. Her own school used to use the look-and-say approach. They were doing quite nicely, but the Head of Department, Joan Dorr, noticed that the older strugglers could not blend and did not know digraphs. In order to help these children, it was decided that this should be concentrated on in the first term, before expecting them to read books for themselves. This emphasis brought significant improvements and the average reading quotient went from 102 to 108. From this experience the teachers realised that most reading problems had been caused by asking children to memorise whole words by their shape and giving them books to read too early. Then Dr Pidgeon asked the school to implement his research programme – children needed to be able to hear all the sounds in words. The school made the programme more teacher-friendly. This brought about another jump in standards – the bottom children became ‘average’ [according to national norms], but the authorities just did not want to know.

Sue Lloyd realised two things:

1. the teaching method counts enormously, and
2. people in authority have been following fashion and fads.

Literate adults are able to read and write words they have never seen before. For reading, they turn the letters into sounds, blend them, and quickly come up with the pronunciation. Writing is the other way round. The adult hears the spoken words, identifies the sounds, and writes letters to represent the sounds. This is how the alphabetic code works.

Sue demonstrated the difficulty of whole-word memorisation by showing the Arabic words for ‘garden’ and ‘fairy’, which look very similar, especially at the beginning. To most of us adults, the Arabic words look just like squiggles – to young children, English words also look like squiggles. The English writing system is opaque for a number of reasons. This means that learning to read and write in English is much harder than in languages with more transparent writing systems. Teaching sight words is a very bad way to start children off. In a class, 25% will learn whatever we do, 50% will jog along on a whole-word start and a bit of phonics. But the bottom 25% cannot cope. They have to go through the blending route and they need to start with a transparent code.

There are two necessary skills: decoding and aural comprehension. If children understand something when you say it to them, they will understand it when they read it, provided that they can get the words off the page. The main problem in schools is poor decoding.

There are several pieces of research on synthetic phonics. They all show similar results, namely that children score roughly one year ahead of chronological age on standardised reading tests after one year at school. Comparisons show that when decoding is well taught, children do better in the long term, too. For example, by the end of primary school Clackmannanshire children were 3.5 years above national norms in word-reading, 20 months above in spelling, and 3.5 months above in comprehension.

Political parties are united in wanting a higher percentage of children achieving Level 4 or above in their Key Stage 2 tests. In one large synthetic phonics school in an economically disadvantaged area, 94% of 11-year-olds are at Level 4 and above in the

Key Stage 2 English test as compared with 77% in England as a whole; 65% are above Level 5 as compared with 27% in England as a whole. If this school can achieve these results, then it should be possible for other schools to do so. This particular school used synthetic phonics, decodable reading books, and an intervention programme for the children who had problems with reading and writing. Synthetic phonics is also fun.

Jolly Phonics teaches five basic skills:

1. letter-sounds
2. letter formation
3. blending
4. identifying sounds in words
5. 'tricky' words.

The first four of these occupy the first six weeks. Teachers also read aloud to children and discuss the stories. The letter-sounds are taught in seven groups. The 'ai' digraph comes in before all the single-letter sounds are finished. Reading is a step-by-step progression. Within the first few days, children understand that they can work words out. The first 18 letter-sounds give access to over 1000 words. We cannot teach everything at once, so we add on gradually. If we give children books that they cannot decode, they give up blending and start guessing. Decodable books are sensible, but we need more research on whether they produce better results.

Writing is taught at the same time as reading and is just as important. We can start by asking children, for example, 'Is there a /s/ in *sun*?' or 'Is there a /s/ in *dog*?' This quickly progresses to listening for all the sounds in words. Then we can start calling out sounds and asking children to write down the letters. Then we move on to calling out words for the children to write down. Then we move on to sentences. Many children can write whatever they want to by the end of Reception. It is unfair, however, to ask children to write if we have not taught them how to do it. Reading is easier than spelling: in reading you can get close to a word's pronunciation by blending, and then 'tweak'. Good spellers use their ears when spelling, know the alternative spellings and read a lot. One typical child, at the end of one term, was able to write 'I went hors ridin. That wos fun.'

A first year check-list would include 42 sounds, lower-and upper-case alphabet letters, alphabetical order, the ability to read and spell tricky words. Letter-names are introduced towards the end of the first six weeks. *Jolly Phonics* recommends *not* teaching 'sight words' as words simply to be memorised (even 'tricky' words should be blended, as far as possible), *not* teaching children to guess from initial letters, pictures or context, *not* teaching letter-names in the first few weeks, and *not* spending time on phonemic awareness without letters.

There remains a need to do something about the advisers: programmes are still being recommended without being tested, and teachers feel under pressure to follow them.

SYNTHETIC PHONICS IN YOUTH OFFENDING INSTITUTIONS AND SCHOOLS

Fiona Nevola

Children make sense of the world by sorting and ordering, matching and comparing, moving logically and in simple steps from concrete to abstract. Activities that are 'brain friendly' are needed. 'Random muddled thinking is a sort of torture to the brain.' Fiona had taught many children at primary and junior school who had problems with reading and spelling but did not really know how to help them.

Then, in 1998, she had read Diane McGuinness's book *Why Children Can't Read*, and she now teaches reading using Diane's research and her understanding of the English alphabet code. She discovered that teaching a child of any age to read is quite easy – 'hard work, but quite simple'. 'A young person handicapped by illiteracy and imprisoned in a Young Offenders' Institution can learn to read in a few weeks.' 'For us to be arguing the toss when about 30% of our children are failing to learn to read by current mixed methods is not just scandalous – it is criminal.'

In July 2004, Fiona had trained teachers and teaching assistants in a village school outside Gateshead. A newly qualified teacher who had not been taught how to teach reading during her initial teacher training implemented Fiona's Sound Reading System – it was then found that the Reception children were at least a year ahead of the Year 1 children (taught by the NLS) by the end of the year. After another year, the head teacher (also a schools inspector), said that he had 'never seen anything like it...*all* the children could access the curriculum and the best thing of all was their evident enjoyment of books and of learning'.

Teachers in Special Schools and Special Education often do not expect children to reach their potential. In one such school, however, a head teacher working with children with severe learning difficulties (SLD) discovered that it was possible, even where speech was very limited, to learn the rudiments of reading and spelling, through one hour of support a week in small groups. 'Darren', a 15-year-old, had thought (together with his parents and teachers) that he would never learn to read because of his SLD, but his reading ability had improved from 5-year-old to 7-year-old level in five terms. Chloe, also with SLD, had very poor speech production, but systematic phonic work helped her to say new words for the first time and to read simple texts after five terms. Rob, another 15-year-old with SLD, learnt to read at a 10-year-old level.

Diane Oliver, a Special Education teacher from Morpeth, discovered Fiona's Sound Reading and found that results exceeded her expectations: 'comprehension, writing and spelling all showed consistent progress. This formed only part of the package: self-esteem, confidence, behaviour all improved'. Diane is now working tirelessly in the north of England to promote the system in Special Education.

Another anecdote concerned Dave. He had been in Young Offenders' Institutions three times and, as he would soon be 18, his next port of call would be adult prison. He could read simple two-syllable words but had never read a book. He had not attended school since he was eleven and had found previous literacy teaching c**p. After being introduced to Sound Reading, he asked 'Why the f**k wasn't I shown this before?' He was interested in the Second World War and was soon coping well with a simple information book about it, reading multisyllabic words and learning to spell Czechoslovakia.

The Probationary Service has started to use the programme. A probationer wrote:

‘I am writing to thank you for your reading programme. I went to school for eleven years and could not read and spell fluently, now I am capable at both.

I have learnt more in the last six months than I ever did at school. I have now passed my Level 1 literacy certificate.’

The Thames Valley Probationary Service is planning to take the programme out across the region.

Fiona finished by speaking about Ryan. Ryan is nine and has serious behaviour problems. He has a reading age of 5.06. His teachers report that after five weeks of Fiona’s teaching his behaviour has completely changed – he is much calmer, has been seen with a book in front of him, is making more effort with his writing, and is attempting to read signposts and cereal packets. His mother has been attending the lessons, and she, too, has been empowered – she can now help Ryan.

‘Our teachers are amongst the most hard-working of all professionals. In the name of their sanity and the children’s progress it is time to give them the tools to teach the most important skill in today’s world – bar none.’

FIT FOR PURPOSE

Ruth Miskin

The government has told us that schools have to choose a high-quality phonics programme. Programme writers are now waiting to be chosen!

At Kobi Nazrul, where Ruth Miskin was head teacher, children were taught letters and sounds in the nursery. Constant repetition is needed to make sure that all children ‘get it’. Schools need to decide who is in charge. The same programme can produce very different results in different schools. The head needs to choose a ‘partner in relentlessness’. All the children who are not fluent readers need to be assessed – are they ABT (‘ain’t been taught’) or SEN (Special Educational Needs)?

In an Islington school of 400, 120 children were on the SEN register. 115 of these could not read. The SEN co-ordinator was so busy filling in Individual Education Plans that she had no time to teach them. Comments would be made such as ‘He needs to learn his sounds’. Ruth’s response was ‘Then *teach* them!’ Schools often want children on the SEN register: the more children it has there, the more excuse it has in OFSTED inspections. In two months, Ruth managed to get 80 children off the register.

While children are learning to decode, they need to put all their effort into that. Until they can read, they cannot read to learn. Children need to be grouped according to ability. Even in Reception, they should be grouped after half a term. By Year 3, there is a very wide range: at one end are the Harry Potter readers – at the other end are children who cannot read. Children do not mind being grouped, and they can get ‘switched on’ so quickly that they can move to a higher group almost overnight. The closer the homogeneity in the group, the faster the progress.

When a school implements Ruth’s *Read-Write Inc.* programme, the head-teacher needs to be involved. The school must also have a RWI manager, RWI teachers, RWI teaching assistants (who work one-to-one with children) and ‘ten-minute tutors’. The school should not wait before giving a failing child help. The school needs to coach, support and monitor.

Just *choosing* a synthetic phonics programme is not enough – the programme needs to be done properly. Ruth requires

- Participation (children need to be ‘full on’ all the way through the lesson).
- Positive teaching
- Pace
- Purpose
- Passion (If you don’t have it, ‘fake it till you make it!’)

Teaching needs to be relentless.

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