

Accountability – where do we see it?

"The DfES has abandoned its original plan to 'kitemark' high quality phonics programmes, relying instead on the expertise of practitioners to apply the criteria and choose an appropriate programme. However, we can see no reason why the DfES should be ignoring its own criteria and actively promoting interventions which contravene them. The DfES refuses to name or promote high quality phonics programmes for initial reading instruction; it should maintain consistency by similarly refraining from naming or promoting intervention programmes. If it feels that it must alert teachers to intervention programmes it should confine its guidance to programmes in which the key element is high quality phonics and ensure that no other part of the programme contains elements which have been superseded by the Rose Report findings."

See 'Reading Recovery', page 12...

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Editorial

Lesley Drake

In her final editorial (Newsletter 59 Autumn term 2006), Jenny Chew wrote:

“It remains to be seen how faithfully the recommendations of the Rose review will be implemented.”

Well, Spring is here, and it's now time to have a look at the green shoots and early buds and see if they augur well for the future!

Certainly, at grassroots level, there looks to be plenty to celebrate. We have two reports from schools which have been using a synthetic phonics approach and experiencing tremendous success. In my own local authority a huge number of Primaries have received training in a synthetic phonics programme and begun implementing it in their schools. This enthusiasm has been generated by teachers going to visit 'pioneering' schools in the authority and by the personal commitment shown by one of the Local Authority (LA) advisers, determined to ensure the Rose recommendations on the teaching of early reading should be spread widely and teachers given the support they needed to implement them.

The government has, rightly, put the onus on practitioners to choose a commercial programme to deliver good quality phonics teaching in their schools and placements, evaluating it against a set of criteria as to what constitutes a good synthetic phonics scheme. Its own programme *Letters and Sounds*, although arguably overdue, will be with us soon and is certainly something the RRF looks forward to seeing. It is worrying that, as predicted, many existing commercial schemes are re-branding themselves as 'synthetic' and 'fully in line with the Rose Report'. There are bound to be lots of new materials on the market making similar claims. We should remain positive that, if they are of good quality then the availability of increased numbers of, for example, decodable texts will be of great benefit to teachers and their pupils. We should also remain on the look out for the genuine 'snake oil' merchants!

It may be Spring, but the teaching climate remains decidedly frosty in some areas, where the teaching of early reading is concerned, notably the Early Years establishment. The recent letter in the Times Educational Supplement, signed by 100 Early Years "experts" and "advisers", leads one to believe that there are still large numbers of whole language woolly mammoths stuck in the permafrost, refusing to budge. The RRF has heard from worrying numbers of early years teachers who have been leaned on by early years advisers, and made to feel that by 'doing phonics' they were in some way harming their children.

These advisers need to be exposed and made accountable for trying to bully fellow professionals and undermine the Rose Report's recommendations. Accountability is something almost entirely lacking in the education world at present. Debbie Hepplewhite presents a case study on how her local authority refused to engage with her over the issue of the intervention programme *Catch Up* and its specific use with 10 children. The implications for all of us in how she, and others, were dealt with raise serious questions about the state of our democracy.

If the signs are good in mainstream provision, with synthetic phonics bursting into bloom up and down the land, the same cannot be said for those poor children who will be ending up in one of the 'government recommended' intervention programmes. Perversely, the government has decided to put its energy into promoting *Reading Recovery* as its preferred catch up programme, despite it being widely discredited and hugely expensive. We include reviews by two RRF committee members on both *Reading Recovery* and the Oxford Brooks *Catch Up* intervention programmes, neither of which would pass muster when held against a synthetic phonics approach kite mark! This raises the question, why would anyone hoping to nourish and nurture their tender synthetic seedlings then tread on them with hobnail boots!

Finally, as the editorship changes hands, we would like to thank Jenny Chew warmly for the outstanding job she did in her period as editor, in sometimes very trying circumstances. *'With your knowledge, patience and great sense of fairness you really have been a shining example to us all. Thank you for all your hard work.'*

The extraordinary events leading to the review of the Oxford Brookes University Catch Up programme!

Debbie Hepplewhite – April 2007

There are teachers who are drawn to schools and pupils in challenging circumstances. They are commonly dedicated, determined - indeed driven to do their utmost for those in their care. Unfortunately, official processes, systems, initiatives (call them what you will) can be counter-productive to the raising of standards in schools - but I expect that there is no-one in authority who would admit to this. The lower the standards of the school (academic and behavioural), the more pressure is brought to bear, the more formality and the more “*non-negotiable*” regimes are forced onto the schools. I speak from experience. Many good people are discarded or fall by the wayside. This includes the pupils.

There is no holding those in authority to account for their wrong decisions, their man-management (or lack of it), their enforced procedures and official programmes, their intimidation, their inadequacy, their criteria for evaluating progress - or anything else that you care to mention. There is simply no questioning anything. But I do question. I question and I persist. And I conclude that there is no accountability from those in authority over us - and, furthermore, there is no *effective and accessible mechanism* for an ordinary person or teacher to hold anyone in authority to account. The odds are simply stacked against justice and common sense. I am confident that many will agree with my observations.

All that remains is having one’s say in the public domain. This is what I do liberally and frequently - thanks to the internet - and over time this has gained resonance with others. I encourage and support others to take advantage of this modern public forum to have their say. With enough ‘voices’ this will make a difference.

In my last challenging school, I did my utmost to persuade others (by word and deed) to pay heed to the need for synthetic phonics for beginning reading instruction and intervention throughout the school. Two-thirds of the upper juniors were illiterate or semi-literate - this is shocking and a consequence of the school and wrong official ‘guidance’. Amongst teaching colleagues and teaching assistants there was much support for my suggestions and individuals would come to me for advice and information. Parents supported where they could. The governing body seemed split in terms of support, the senior management sat on the fence, and the local authority literacy advisers would have nothing to do with me. They actively and blatantly undermined my work and advice. They provided *Further Literacy Support* lessons for the borderline children and did not consult with the class teachers about this decision, nor did they consult with me about the needs of the pupils in my role as Upper Junior Team Leader. (*Eventually I requested to be allowed to stand down from this management position because I did not agree with anything being brought in by the local authority!*) They enforced the use of the NLS *Early Literacy Support* and *Additional Literacy Support* programmes despite the protests of knowledgeable teaching assistants who had to deliver them (but who wanted to deliver synthetic phonics lessons and said so) and they simply ignored my recognised expertise and personal teaching success in reading instruction. The School Improvement Adviser was in an uncomfortable position as he was fully aware of how unpopular I was with his colleagues and the onus on him was, of course, to implement the official initiatives.

Eventually, as the governing body would not allow me to downsize from my full-time upper junior class teaching post to pursue my desire to provide synthetic phonics teacher-training, I left the school. After a term, however, I was invited to return as part-time manager of the Learning Support Unit to teach 10 junior children with literacy difficulties and significant poor behaviour. I jumped at the chance! I immediately assessed the pupils’ code knowledge and skills of blending and segmenting, noted their poor handwriting - and set about teaching them systematically through a synthetic phonics route. Their results in terms of new learning of code knowledge and skills, and improved behaviour, were remarkable in just one term. The improvement ratio using the Burt Word Reading test was 3.5 to 6 times the expected rate. I had quantifiable results.

A week from the end of my first term back, I was told that my services were no longer required as the school had financial difficulties. I liaised with the class teachers to describe what they needed to do, and what resources they might find helpful, to carry on with the synthetic phonics teaching. At that time, everyone ‘oohed’ and ‘aahed’ about the children’s progress and change of attitude to their learning.

Shortly after I left, however, I heard through the grapevine that one of the pupils’ class teachers and a couple of teaching assistants were being sent by the local authority advisers, free of charge, to attend the Oxford Brookes University *Catch Up* intervention programme. One teacher told me that the local authority advisers had said that the school needed “*something different from Debbie’s advice*”.

This was very worrying.

I contacted the local authority literacy department, gave my name to the receptionist and asked to see a copy of the *Catch Up* programme to evaluate. This first lady I spoke to was very helpful and said, "I am sure we can find a spare copy somewhere". The message came back that they were unable to supply me with the programme.

I then approached the acting Director of Education and told him about my worries and asked him who had evaluated the *Catch Up* programme for the local authority - and offered my services to evaluate the *Catch Up* programme on the authority's behalf. I also asked whether the local authority was in support of the Rose Report recommendations, noting that the council was a Conservative council and the Conservatives support synthetic phonics teaching as a flagship policy. Sure enough, the local authority *claimed* to be in line with the Rose recommendations.

I established a group email to take my worries to the following people in my local authority: the Chief School Improvement adviser, the challenging school's School Improvement Adviser, the lead National Primary Strategy literacy consultant, the Director of Education and the subsequent Director, the National Union of Teachers representative (a local headteacher), the local education correspondent, the Conservative MP, the chair of the governors of the challenging school, the councillor with the portfolio for education and my local RRF colleague, Elizabeth Nonweiler.

There was some consternation about the basis of my offer to review the *Catch Up* programme. Was I offering my professional (paid) services as a phonics consultant in which case there would be a rigmarole to engage my services or... what? If my reply was that I would do this for them free of charge, then they asked why they should ask me when I was nothing to do with the authority - that is, not 'employed' by them. In other words, they had an excuse whatever my response. I said my offer was to undertake the evaluation voluntarily as a concerned local community member with a nationally recognised expertise in reading instruction.

They neither accepted my offer, nor informed me who had evaluated the *Catch Up* programme for the authority (had anyone?). The senior management of the school told my friends within the school not to supply me with the *Catch Up* material because I was "causing trouble for the school".

I tried suggesting to the local authority advisers that in these days of 'transparency', surely any material or programme used in a state school should be available for anyone to review. There was no response to this issue. On advice, I then tried to use the Freedom of Information Act to get hold of the programme from the local authority and the written reply was to state some paragraph in the act which said the local authority did not need to supply me with information which I was able to access from elsewhere.

Eventually, a politician from a different district acquired the *Catch Up* programme and kindly sent it to me to evaluate. The contents were shockingly inadequate and did not resemble in any shape, size or form a synthetic phonics teaching programme. It was easy for me to draw attention to this fact by alerting my group email recipients to the *Catch Up* pupil phonics assessment. This amounts to the 26 letters of the alphabet plus four digraphs ch, sh, th and wh and a long list of consonant clusters (which are not even taught as units of sound in a synthetic phonics programme as the phoneme - or single sound unit - is the basis for the teaching). Listening for sounds was in the first, last, medial order and not the all-through-the-word order highlighted in the Rose Report. There was no response from any of the email recipients to this information. I also drew attention to the claims of the programme writers of 3X improvement ratio and compared this to my results at the challenging school which exceeded the *Catch Up* claims with every pupil. No response. I offered to explain in detail why the programme was not appropriate for special needs. No response. I asked if anyone would like to attend *Catch Up* training with me. No response. I have now learnt that the Ruth Miskin *Read Write Inc* books which I had managed to acquire for the school (some donated, some bought) were removed from the Learning Support Unit and replaced with the repetitive text, look and guess books recommended by the *Catch Up* programme and the *Catch Up* trained staff members now speak of the need for a 'range of strategies' - contrary to the observations of the Rose Report.

I have raised this situation with individuals with national authority. No response.

These events do not even begin to describe the number of issues I have raised with my local authority over the past eight years to no avail. I have been told by the current Corporate Director for the Children and Young People Directorate that it is entirely "inappropriate" to approach any of the parents of the pupils with special needs about these issues as I am no longer working at the school. ..

...And neither are most of the other staff members working at this school since it was closed down this Easter (07) to be opened as a Fresh Start school following the Easter holidays. My former colleagues, whom I found to be very capable and committed, were sacked en masse (couched as 'redundancy') following what I consider to be the failure of the local authority and senior

management team to get a grip on literacy and standards of behaviour. Closure, after all, is the final answer to challenging schools and is arguably the most unaccountable official behaviour of all. The authority has, however, to all intents and purposes fulfilled its obligations to follow national guidance in all matters. Considering the size of salaries and responsibilities afforded to local authority advisers, this, in my mind, raises the bigger question as to whether advisers really help or hinder progress and standards in schools, whether local authority advisers add anything to the climate that challenging schools work within - indeed, whether they warrant their existence as advisers at all.

Ultimately, staff, pupils and parents have all been betrayed at the challenging school I have described by a wide range of official guidance, procedures and initiatives which were rolled out to address the problems. The real problems, however, were never addressed by these at all. How much is this replicated in other challenging schools? Until such time as challenging schools are in the hands of sensible people with a real understanding of how to teach and remediate literacy, how to support staff, pupils and parents compassionately, and how to address pupils who have become unruly (usually through no fault of their own), then the Fresh Start school will be no more successful than the original school although it may look a lot glossier and have a more grandiose name. We shall have to wait and see.

Meanwhile, my local authority has notified me of the growing popularity of the *Catch Up* programme in schools in this authority. We learn that it is in 4,000 schools across the country. I have asked how the local authority can possibly purport to be in line with the Rose recommendations *and* promote the *Catch Up* programme simultaneously. This is a contradiction in terms. No response. I have also pointed out, just like Mona McNee, that however vast the number of people who support or promote something, this does not mean that it is 'right'. I am so upset for the staff who will be trained in this, and similar, intervention programmes; and for the children who will receive flawed teaching in the name of catching up with peers - and for the parents of children struggling with literacy who are oblivious to this state of affairs.

The RRF has heard that local authorities across the country are currently promoting *Catch Up* heavily in secondary schools. How can local authorities be held to account for this advice and how can we effectively and quickly alert parents and mis-trained staff about this situation? Everyone who understands these issues needs to become pro-active in their circles and not just rely on others to challenge the status quo.

Update: My local weekly newspaper has recently published a piece on the opening of the Fresh Start school. It states that the school "will be located on the same site....but is to have a 'completely new outlook', with new staff, including the headteacher...". To my mind this could be readily interpreted that the previous staff members have failed the children and needed to be replaced. Knowing what I know about this scenario, I think this is truly outrageous and it indicates nothing about the realities leading to the old school's closure and the lack of accountability of the actions of those in authority. I shall be raising further questions at all levels regarding this scenario as it is symptomatic of a total lack of transparency and justice and seriously affects ordinary people.

A Comparison of the Recommendations of the Rose Report and Oxford Brookes University Catch Up Programme Training

*Elizabeth Nonweiler
on behalf of the Reading Reform Foundation*

Introduction

Our government has accepted all the recommendations of the Final Report of the Independent Review into the Teaching of Early Reading (Rose, 2006) and has promised to ensure that they are implemented. Rose states that high quality phonic work, as defined by the review, should be a key feature of provision for pupils with literacy difficulties. Catch Up is a literacy intervention programme designed to help 6-11 year olds who struggle with their reading. In February 2007, I attended a three morning course called 'Delivering the Catch Up Programme'. My aim was to find out to what extent Catch Up training promotes best practice as described in the Rose Report.

The trainers gave a professional and enthusiastic presentation, with the result that many of the trainees were clearly inspired. Most of them were teaching assistants, who had been sent by their schools so that they would be able to deliver Catch Up with individual pupils. There were also teachers in management positions (SENCOs, deputy heads), who came so that they would understand what is expected of those delivering the training.

Some Crucial Points from the Rose Report:

Training should promote high quality phonic work, including

- systematic, regular and explicit teaching of phonics (para.46)
- letter/sound correspondences in a clearly defined incremental sequence (para.51)
- the skill of blending phonemes in order, all through a word, to read it (para.51)
- the skills of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell (para.51)
- understanding that blending and segmenting are reversible processes (para.51)
- unwavering focus on ensuring that pupils gain phonic knowledge and skills, especially asking them to blend sounds together to read and segment the sounds in words to spell (para.228)
- consolidation and revision in lessons of previously taught phonic knowledge and skills (para.228)
- simple, rigorous and purposeful assessment (para.61)

Training should be characterised by

- straightforward, well structured presentation of the phonic knowledge, skills and understanding pupils need to learn, ensuring that each stage of learning is secured (para.187)
- ensuring teachers understand the relationship between phonic work and comprehension (para.187)
- guidance on how to teach irregular words (para.187)
- guidance on regular assessment of phonic knowledge, skills and understanding and using the information gained to improve teaching and learning (para.187)

Trainees should be told that

- word recognition is the process of using phonics to recognise words (para.122)
- pupils should use knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and the skills of blending sounds together in order to decode effortlessly (para.118)
- it is not a good idea to teach pupils to use context to read the words on the page (Appendix 1, para.43)
- pupils should not be taught habitually to infer the word they need from pictures (para.117)
- pupils should be taught to use their phonic knowledge not only for the first letter in a word, but to read the whole word (para.237)

Training should help adults working with pupils

- to acquire excellent knowledge of the phonic content to be taught (para.228)
- to pronounce phonemes clearly and precisely (para.228)

Which of these points from the Rose Report was delivered by the Catch Up training?

Simply, none of them.

How were we advised to help the pupils involved with Catch Up?

We were told to present a ten minute structured individual session once or twice a week. We should select a suitable book for the pupil to read and then deliver the session, divided into two minutes of prepared reading, four minutes of pupil reading and four minutes of a linked writing activity.

The instructions for prepared reading were:

- Go through the book.
- Use key words from the text.
- Ask pupil to predict the ending of the story.
- Give pupil the whole story.

For hearing the pupil read:

- Pupil reads.
- Observe, use Pause Prompt Praise, discuss text and record miscues.
- Select a word from the recorded miscues for follow up focus.

For the linked writing activity:

- Provide focused teaching of the selected word, based on miscue analysis.
- Pupil practises writing the word and a sentence that includes the word.

Assessment

Catch Up assessment consists of

- Reading Interview: Questions are provided to ask pupils about their reading habits, perceptions and experiences.
- Sight Word Knowledge: There are 4 lists of high frequency words for the pupil to attempt to read.
- Phonological Knowledge: Charts are provided to record
 1. Grapheme-Phoneme Matching - of the single letters of the alphabet, ch, sh, th and wh, i.e. 30 graphemes
 2. Hearing Phonemes - in the initial, final and medial position in CVC words
 3. Initial Consonant Clusters - e.g. pl, fr, sn. It is not acceptable for the pupil to say the sounds separately.
- Letter Name Knowledge: This includes all lower and upper case letters.
- Letter Formation Knowledge

The assessments are expected to take about an hour and a half; we should do them before starting the programme; we should not leave any out. The trainer said, "Although they are time consuming, they give a huge profile. You will become the expert on these pupils." We were told that assessments show what pupils can and can't do and where to go next; individual targets are set accordingly. However, we were later told to use miscues, and not assessment, to decide what to teach. A trainee asked what to do if a child made no suitable mistakes, and was told that she could then refer to the targets. The only other use of the assessment information is to base the choice of reading book on the number of high frequency words read correctly.

Children who struggle with their reading are usually those who find it difficult to memorise whole words and do not learn grapheme/phoneme correspondences without direct teaching. Several thousand words and over 120 graphemes are used to write everyday English. For instance, the text in 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt', from a Catch Up book collection, includes more than 100 graphemes. Catch Up phonics teaching is based on either miscues or assessment of just 30 graphemes. The result must be that pupils are taught to recognise only a few of the graphemes they have not already learned, and have to try to remember whole words.

Choosing appropriate books

We were told to choose books which have texts that are challenging but not frustrating. A book list was provided with books graded according to 10 Catch Up levels.

Catch Up levels are based on:

- number of words on a line
- number of lines on a page
- number of high frequency words used
- degree of repetition
- print size
- inclusion of technical vocabulary
- complexity of sentences

The decoding skills required at each level were not mentioned.

Catch Up Level 2 is for pupils who can read only 15 to 30 of the 45 (reception sight) words in the first two lists of high frequency words in the assessment. I analysed the words in these lists and found that they include altogether:

- 15 words with simple one-to-one letter/sound correspondences: *a, am, at, in, it, on, up, can, big, cat, dad, dog, get, mum, yes*
- 3 words with 2 letter consonant clusters: *and, went, play*
- 11 words with 7 digraphs that are commonly taught in synthetic phonics programmes as basic code: *she, see, look, for, day, play, away, this, the, they, going* (*play* has both a consonant cluster and a digraph)
- 14 words with 9 common alternative spellings: *my, we, he, me, she, no, go, going, all, like, I, is, was, the*
- 7 words with unusual spellings: *to, of, you, come, said, they, are*

Here is an example of the text in a book from level 2:

Shopping

p.1 What does a newsagent sell?

p.2 What does a toy shop sell?

p.3 What does a chemist sell?

- p.4 What does a supermarket sell?
- p.5 Where can you buy these things?

On each page there are colourful illustrations, which give clues to the words in the text. *A child who could read only 15 to 30 words at Catch Up Level 2 would be unable to decode most of the words in this text.*

When choosing books, we were told, “Avoid at all costs books which prevent fluency. Don’t choose books where they spend time sounding out.”

How to Help Children to Read Words

A slide showed us a range of reading strategies:

- sounding out letters
- building up letter patterns
- applying knowledge of other words and rules
- applying knowledge of grammar
- using the context for clues

‘Blends phonemes accurately’ is one of the strategies written on the pupil’s record sheet for adults to highlight, but the trainer did not mention it. She said that there is a problem with “that slow robotic reading that is going to lead to more slow robotic reading”. She suggested that if pupils are using phonic clues all the time, we may need to work on context clues. “The problem we’ve got is that the pupils won’t have all the strategies.”

The trainer explained, “The purpose of prepared reading is to make sure that they can concentrate on reading for meaning, because they have no surprises, they know the story and they know the tricky words.”

We were told about a boy called Michael who said, “I know why you do this. It makes it easy. You give me half the words.” The trainer said, “He understood the process.” *Apparently Michael was not taught how to recognise these words independently.*

Examples from Videos Shown at the Training:

- During prepared reading, the adult pointed mainly at the pictures and very briefly at the written words, ‘shoes’ and ‘helmet’, as she told the story in her own words. *Nothing was said about the letters or sounds in the words.*
- A child read, “But then Dipper swam a shark.” The adult asked, “Did that make sense?” Then the child read correctly, “But then Dipper saw a shark.” *She did not suggest decoding ‘saw’.*
- A child said “/w/” for wreck. The adult asked, “Do you remember what we called the boat under the water?” The child was silent. The adult said, “It was a wreck.” *She did not explain that ‘wr’ is pronounced /r/ in ‘wreck’, or in any way help him decode ‘wreck’.*
- A child read “nose”. The adult said, “Did you find that (the word ‘nose’) ... by looking at the picture? Good boy.”
- When a child read ‘with’ incorrectly, the adult asked, “What’s the beginning sound?” The child said, “/w/”. The adult asked, “Any idea what it could be?” The child was silent. She asked about the next sound. The child said “/i/”. The adult said, “Yes,” and then asked again what the word was. The child said, “with”. *I deduced that guessing from initial letters is considered preferable to blending to the end of a word.*
- Another child read ‘couldn’t’ for ‘can’t’. The adult said, ‘Try again’. The child read /ka/. The adult said, “can’t”, without asking the child to decode any further.
- On one occasion a child paused at the word ‘chest’. The adult asked, “What does that make?” pointing at ‘ch’. Without further prompting, the child successfully blended the sounds to read ‘chest’, and the adult wrote in a speech bubble, “I liked the way you sounded that out”. *This was the only occasion during the training that this strategy was praised.*

How to Help Children to Spell

We were told that we should choose one word to focus on, based on a miscue that is either a high frequency sight word or a word with a common letter pattern.

For sight words, we were shown a slide with the example ‘was’:

1. Tell pupil to study the word ‘was’ and to memorise it by saying the **letter names** (*bold text as on the power point slide*).

2. Tell the pupil to close their eyes and visualise the whole word, saying the **letter names** again.
3. Ask pupil to write the word from memory.
4. Tell pupil to check if they have spelled the word correctly. Then cover the word and ask pupil to spell it again. NB. The pupil always writes the word from memory.

Nothing was said about segmenting the spoken word. In the case of words with irregular spellings, nothing was said about identifying the more usual or unusual grapheme/phoneme correspondences. For instance, the child's attention was not drawn to the 'w' in 'was', which is the usual letter for /w/; or that 'wa' is the common grapheme for 'wo' (/w/+/o/).

For words with common letter patterns, we were given the example, 'hill', and told to

1. Break hill into 3 phonemes. *This was the only time it was suggested that a word should be segmented.*
 2. Ask the pupil to blend the phonemes to make the word. *This was the only time it was suggested that children should be asked to blend phonemes.*
 3. Cover the word and ask the pupil to write it from memory. *It was not suggested that the pupil should use the process of segmenting the word to help to spell it.*
 4. Tell the pupil that if they can write 'hill' they can spell many other words which have the same 'ill' pattern, e.g. 'fill'.
 5. Help the pupil to generate other words with the letter pattern, 'ill', e.g. mill, pill, kill, will.
- If a child is stuck trying to spell a word like 'hill', the trainer said to ask, "What does it begin with?" "Hopefully," she said, "they'll be able to add the ending; if they can't, write it for them."

Examples from the Videos

- A child tried to write, 'Jack was on the hill'. The adult filled in 'Jack' for him. *I understood that she believed it was difficult for him to spell 'Jack'; but 'Jack' is easy to segment and spell. The correct spelling choice for /k/ could have been given if necessary.*
- For practising spelling 'want', a child was told to look, cover, write and check. When she made a mistake, she was told to try again. *She was not shown that the only tricky part of 'want' is the 'a'.*

For follow-up, it was suggested that children could play an onset and rime game from the Catch Up CD.

Skills and Knowledge for Adults

Language Comprehension and Word Recognition

We were very briefly shown a slide of the 'simple view of reading' as in the Rose Report and the new Primary Framework. The trainer told us that this structure is very new. She explained that she was trying to get her head round it, but her understanding was that children may have strengths in some of these areas, and that it is our job to establish where the weaknesses are.

We were all given a handout with the same text, but half of us had a title about tennis, and half had a title about school dinners. The text was about 'servers', 'a board', and 'a repeat of yesterday'. The point made was that the title influenced our understanding of the text. The trainer concluded that a prepared read, where children are given the title and a bit more, empowers the children. *As the Rose Report makes clear, this is about language comprehension and not about word recognition. The distinction was not clarified, and the implication was that the aim of the reading preparation is to help children recognise the words.*

Phonic Knowledge and Irregular Words

The alphabet code was not explained to the trainees. The only guidance on how to teach irregular words was to use Look, Cover, Write and Check. The trainer said, "As you know, with high frequency words, you often can't sound them out." She described the word 'out' as "not phonetically regular". *Yet, the usual pronunciation of the grapheme 'ou' is taught early on in synthetic phonics programmes.*

Materials

Catch Up Boxes

At the end of the first morning, trainees collected their Catch Up boxes, which included:

- A Video

The video is for showing to whole school staff, parents, governors and local authority advisors. It explains that Catch Up focuses on teaching children to read with understanding and uses a balanced approach. As well as the individual sessions described in the training, the video shows a group reading session where a child is praised for reading smoothly with lots of expression. There is no teaching about how to decode words. A child who can't read 'dragon' is told to look at 'drink', 'drip', etc. We are told, "Not only has his fluency improved ... but confidence and self esteem have also ... He's not just relating the picture and the words together; he's actually looking for meaning as well."

- A Teaching Manual
This provides detailed guidance on how to deliver the Catch Up Programme, as in the training. There is some confusion between phonemes and graphemes, as pupils are to be asked 'to point at and say the sound of each phoneme', but a phoneme is a sound and cannot be pointed at. However, later the words are used correctly.
- A List of Fiction and Non-fiction Books
The books are graded according to Catch Up levels as described in the training. They include books from many well known schemes such as Oxford Reading Tree, All Aboard, Story Chest, but not structured phonics schemes, such as Read Write Inc Story Books, Jolly Readers, King Wizzit, Jelly and Bean.
- A Pupil Progress Booklet
This is the booklet described in the training to keep a record of each session. It includes details of the assessment activities, forms to fill in for individual teaching sessions, and pages of pictures of rockets, dinosaurs, etc., with the title, 'Words I Can Spell' for children to fill with words from the Catch Up High Frequency Words lists. Again, there is some confusion about vocabulary, as 'Phonological Knowledge' is the title given to tasks involving matching letters to sounds, but phonological knowledge is only about the sounds of language, and not about how letters represent sounds.
- Photocopiable Games and Activities for Follow up and Extension work
Half the games and activities involve matching, either 'sight words', rhyming words or letters. An alphabet game involves matching single letters to the initial sound of words represented by pictures. There are similar games for single letters at the ends of words, single letter vowels in the middle of words, the digraphs sh, wh, th, ch, consonant clusters at the beginning of words and the vowel digraphs, ee, oo, ou and ai (but vowel digraphs were not included in assessment or training). 'Syllable Chunks' involves putting two halves of written words together to match to a whole word. Spelling games involve looking at words and then writing them from memory. None of the games or activities focus on blending sounds all through the word to read or segmenting words to spell.

Leaflets

- Interactive CD ROMs
This advertises CD ROMs to support Catch Up sessions. CD ROM 1, which I have seen, is based on the high frequency word lists, initial letters, and onset and rime. The games are similar to the photocopiable games; they involve nothing to do with blending sounds all through the word to read or segmenting words to spell. For many of the games, it seems to me that a child who cannot already read or spell the words on the CD cannot play, but a child who can read them does not need the practice. In other games, the child sees and hears the words before playing and is then expected to memorise the words as wholes for reading or spelling.
- Catch Up Book Collections
This advertises 3 collections containing a selection of 40 different non-scheme books, graded according to Catch Up criteria. They include books such 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt' and 'Shopping', which are referred to earlier in this article.

Conclusion

The content of the Catch Up Programme training was quite different from the recommendations of the Rose Report.

Appendix

The director of Catch Up sent me the following document to explain how Catch Up links to the renewed Primary Framework for Literacy, which has been designed to support practitioners in implementing the recommendations of the Rose Report:

Catch Up and the renewed Primary Framework for Literacy

Catch Up is a one-to-one literacy intervention programme for pupils in Years 2 – 8. It provides focused teaching, tailored to the needs of the individual, in those aspects of literacy that struggling readers find difficult.

Raising expectations

The renewed Primary Framework for Literacy prioritises the importance of raising expectations for all children, especially those at greatest risk of underachievement.

With effective support, struggling readers are able to make significant progress – 85% of pupils on the Catch Up Programme make double the expected progress. Catch Up also helps them access the full curriculum and significantly improves their self-esteem.

The ‘simple view of reading’

Within what it calls the **simple view of reading**, the Framework identifies two components: **word recognition** and **language comprehension**.

Word recognition

To address word recognition, the Framework recommends **synthetic phonics** as the preferred method of teaching reading to be used with all children in Reception and Year 1.

Catch Up is not intended to be used with those young beginner readers. Catch Up is for children who have been unable to make a significant start with reading in Reception and Year 1. It builds upon the initial reading skills taught in the Early Years and gives children a fresh start with reading.

Although Catch Up is not an Early Years synthetic phonics programme, phonics is an important part of Catch Up: the Catch Up **initial assessments** enable the adult to identify any areas of phonic weakness; the Catch Up **sessions** then provide opportunities to practise and build upon phonic knowledge. The child is encouraged to blend phonemes to decode unfamiliar words and to segment a word into its phonemes.

The Framework also acknowledges the need for pupils to ‘establish a store of familiar words that are recognised immediately on sight and linked to their meanings’. Catch Up addresses this in the Catch Up session when pupils are taught to spell irregular high frequency words.

Language comprehension

The Framework identifies comprehension as the ultimate goal of learning to read. In each Catch Up session we address comprehension by introducing each text and ensuring the pupil understands what they are going to read before they start reading. When they have finished reading, the pupils are then asked literal and inferential questions, to support and reinforce their understanding of the text.

Summarising the sequence of learning in a Catch Up session

In each Catch Up session we start with a **text**,
then we focus on a **sentence**,
and then we concentrate on a **word**,
and study its letters and/or **phonemes**,
then we put the word back into its **sentence**.

Catch Up and phonics kite marking

The phonics kite mark isn’t applicable to Catch Up which is designed for struggling readers in Years 2 – 8. The kite mark is designed for Early Years phonic programmes.

My [Elizabeth's] response to this Catch Up document:

1. *The Rose Report states that high quality phonic work, as defined by the review, should be a key feature of the provision of intervention. In other words, it is not only for Reception and Year 1.*
2. *The Catch Up initial assessments do not 'enable the adult to identify any areas of phonic weakness', because only 30 graphemes are assessed - most of which are single letters.*
3. *The sequence of teaching described in this document is top-down analytic phonics and not synthetic phonics.*
4. *In the training I observed, not once was it suggested that a child be asked 'to blend phonemes to decode unfamiliar words or to segment a word into its phonemes'.*

Reading Recovery

Maggie Downie

Reading Recovery (RR) is the trade mark of a remedial reading programme developed by Marie Clay in New Zealand in the 1970s. It is a whole language programme, developed in response to falling levels of literacy engendered by whole language teaching, and has a primary emphasis on reading for meaning. It has eschewed, or marginalised, the teaching of systematic, explicit phonics as part of learning to read. There has been a substantial amount of criticism, by the international reading research community, of the RR programme and the claims made for its effectiveness, e.g. Grossen, Coulter & Ruggles, Tunmer and Chapman and others [1]. Critics point out that RR cannot produce any independent research to back its claims.

Explicit phonics instruction

Nancy Salvato, in the US, reports [2] that Marie Clay, in 2001, refused to modify RR to include explicit, systematic phonics instruction in order to make it eligible for Reading First funding in the US. Instead, she stated that she would rewrite the description of RR's components in such a way as to bring it into compliance with the Reading First legislation.

Reading Recovery in the UK

Reading Recovery has been used in the UK for many years. However, it is a very costly intervention and fell out of use as school budgets were squeezed. The RR network in the UK is based at the University of London's Institute of Education. In 2005 the RR network obtained funding of £10m from a charitable foundation, and support from the DfES, to implement RR in UK schools under the title 'Every Child A Reader' (ECAR). In the first year, 2005/06, RR was rolled out in 61 schools. ECAR plans to fund 255 schools in 2006/07 and 310 in 2007/08 [3]. In his November Budget Statement Gordon Brown (Chancellor) announced that a further £10m of government money would be put into the project. He has stated that he would like to see RR in every school. To put the current coverage of RR into perspective I should point out that there are some 24,000 KS1/2 schools in the UK. To put the costs into perspective, if (as the ECAR report says) it cost £1m to fund 61 schools in the first year, then it would seem that it would cost around £400m to roll this out across the UK.

Reading Recovery in the UK enjoys a very high profile as a result of its 2005 funding coup and further encouragement from the Chancellor. Has this funding enabled RR to maintain that high profile with Parliamentary receptions, extensive media coverage and the production of weighty reports?

Its stated aims are highly laudable; to ensure that every child leaves school able to read, and there is no doubting this sincerity. To the general public, the government and the educational establishment, from academics to teachers, RR presents no problem. The RR methodology is familiar, as it comprises the Balanced Literacy methods for so long practised in schools and promoted by the DfES. So why is the Reading Reform Foundation objecting to this apparently worthwhile project?

At the time that the then Education Minister, Ruth Kelly, announced the inception of the 'Every Child A Reader' programme, The Rose Review of the initial teaching of reading was underway. This review was requested by the House Of Commons (HOC) Select Committee on Education and Skills. The Select Committee's inquiry was, in its turn, a response to growing concern that, despite the inception of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998, standards of literacy were demonstrably not rising as expected. An initial apparent improvement had levelled out at around 80% of children reaching the required standard and, despite a spate

of DfES intervention programmes, had not moved.

The Rose Report was published in March 2006. Jim Rose and his review panel undertook exhaustive research into the subject (details of the evidence considered can be found in Appendix 23 of a document submitted to the HOC Select Committee on Science and Technology [4]). The Report recommended that the NLS be revised in the light of the findings of the Review body. Subsequent guidance has been published in the Primary Framework for literacy and mathematics. (Supporting guidance to head teachers and chairs of governors. DfES document [5]). This document sets out the criteria for high quality phonic work and contains statements which are pertinent to the use of RR as an intervention.

“Teaching needs to be staged so that priority is given to the development of word-reading processes in the early stages of learning to read...”

“The Primary National Strategy distinguishes three ‘waves’ of teaching and intervention which adequately cover the range of provision that best supports children with significant literacy difficulties. It is important to recognise that these ‘waves’ signify types of provision and not categories of children. **High quality phonic work, as defined by the review, should be a key feature of the provision in each of these ‘waves’:**”

Synthetic phonics practitioners had every right to be reasonably satisfied with the conclusions of the Rose Report, and the subsequent moves towards its implementation by the DfES. However, it soon became clear that there was a startling contradiction between the actions of the DfES in, on the one hand, implementing the Rose Report and, on the other hand, actively promoting the use of intervention programmes such as RR which directly contravene the principles of ‘high quality phonics instruction’. Not only do they appear to only pay lip service to phonic work, but they also appear to promote the very searchlights strategies (use of context, initial letters and pictures to ‘predict’ words) which were heavily implicated in the failure of children to learn to read. Marilyn Jager Adams [6] concluded that the 3 cueing system, on which the searchlights model was based, was, in effect, an educational myth. Dr. Morag Stuart [7] commented “The model of reading which is presented to teachers (in the NLS) which is this black hole of four things (i.e. four ‘searchlights’) operating and disappearing into a text is completely and utterly misleading and **bears no relation to any research on reading that I know of**”.

Children in need of extra help in learning to read are still beginning readers. They still need intensive extra phonics instruction, ideally reinforced by the use of decodable texts, to promote fluent decoding and engender confidence. These children are still ‘in the early stages of learning to read’ when priority should still be given to word reading processes (says the Rose Report). It is incredible that children who are at this stage are being offered RR, with its eclectic mix of phonics, ‘other strategies’ and book banded texts.

How does Reading Recovery teach reading?

I have analysed the description of a typical session given in the Every Child A Reader report and an article on ‘phonics’ by Sue Bodman, RR Coordinator/National trainer in the Nov 2006 edition of the RR Newsletter, The Running Record.

Strategies for identifying words

The Rose Report makes it clear that the only strategy to be taught to beginning readers for identifying words is decoding and blending. So what do we make of this passage from the description of a RR session given in their report on Every Child A Reader?:

“They (the teacher) ..encourage the child to identify their own independent reading strategies:

What was it you did on that page to help you to work out the word...?

Can you find a page where you got stuck and then found a way of sorting things out? What was it that helped you?

How did you know that it said ‘brothers’ not ‘kids’? Why isn’t this ‘box’?”

And:

“The teacher might also ask the child to ‘take a word to fluency’, practising a common word over and over, tracing it in sand, or salt, or multicoloured pens.....The teacher might set a target for the child to use an independent reading strategy.”

Sue Bodman writes of 'providing a context for working with **a range** of word reading strategies'.

This very clearly implies that the RR teacher is teaching more than one 'strategy' for identifying words. Would any teacher of 'high quality phonics' recognise these procedures as those that they would use when teaching struggling children to work out what a word **is**?

Phonic work

RR is claiming that it complies with the requirements of the Rose Report. The ECAR report states that the scheme is: "Using the opportunity presented by international changes to RR's methodology in its revised core texts to take a fresh look at the role of synthetic phonics in the scheme, ensuring consistency with the developments underway (*sic*) as a consequence of the government's Rose Review of the early teaching of reading".

And here is Sue Bodman in *The Running Record*: "Phonics has always been an important part of Reading Recovery's success with the most vulnerable literacy learners."

But Marie Clay, in 2001, "refused to modify Reading Recovery to include explicit, systematic phonics instruction in order to make it eligible for Reading First funding in the US". Has there been a change of heart? Or, as with Clay's 'rewriting of the description of the programme's components to bring it in line with the Reading First Legislation', is RR UK adapting their terminology in order to comply with the requirement for 'high quality phonics'?

The ECAR report session description:

"...Then there will be work with magnetic letters on a whiteboard to develop phonemic and phonological skills. The child will compose and write their own sentence or story, analysing the sounds in words in order to write them."

Sue Bodman: "'Making and breaking' is part of the Reading Recovery lesson that involves children in the manipulation of magnetic letters to **notice** connections between words, clusters of letters or parts of words". Discovery learning? Note that the child is not **taught**.

Ms Bodman's description of the phonic work is worrying: "We work with the few words or letters that the child knows, demonstrating how they look similar to or different from other letters. 'Learning to look at print' (Clay 1993) is a specific teaching procedure in Reading Recovery, where the child is taught to attend to print features in helpful ways, '*since the beginning reader can only sample some features in print which he recognises*' (Clay 1993 p. 23)."

With high quality phonics, a child does **not** only sample some features in print, and does not work solely with '...letters that the child knows'. Instead the child is taught systematically and explicitly how a letter, or letter combination, represents a sound, and consolidates and builds on that knowledge from session to session. Children are not given text in which they can only recognise a few sounds (sample some of the print features) but texts which contain graphemes they have been taught, on which they can practice their knowledge in a meaningful way to sound out and blend all the words.

The Rose Report makes it clear that the phonic skills should be taught progressively:

"In practice, this means teaching relatively short, discrete daily sessions, designed to progress from simple elements to the more complex aspects of phonic knowledge, skills and understanding."

I can find no mention of progression in the ECAR report, or Ms Bodman's article.

Texts

While the Rose Review does not limit text for early reading to decodable text, it has this to say:

"There is some force in the view that, as they learn to master the alphabetic code, children should be given reading material that is **well within their reach** [bold added] in the form of 'decodable books', that is to say, early reading books specially designed to incorporate regular text, which children can decode using the phonic skills they have secured. **The view is that this enables**

them to benefit from 'quick wins' in practising phonic skills and gaining confidence from reading a whole, albeit short, book. [bold added] Using such books as part of the phonic programme does not preclude other reading. Indeed it can be shown that such books help children develop confidence and an appetite for reading more widely." [8] (para. 82)

The children who RR are working with are still mastering the alphabetic code and are precisely those who will benefit most from decodable texts. RR uses its whole language/ 'look and say' based 'levelled' books for their intervention. Children with Reading Ages of below 6 are presented with complex words, such as 'amazing', 'grandpa', and 'concert' [9]. These require a level of phoneme/grapheme knowledge far in excess of what these children will know. The only way that these books can be 'read' by these children is if the teacher tells them these words, or expects them to learn them as 'whole words'. This practice is not only incompatible with high quality phonics teaching, but is known to be damaging, as whole word learning activates a different area of the brain from all through the word decoding. This area is known from MRI brain imaging to be activated by 'dyslexic' readers. It also causes the children to be confused as to which strategy they should use for unfamiliar words. They should only be using one strategy, decoding.

If the children are being 'told' the words they are unable to read, what sort of reading experience are they getting? How frustrating must it be for them to be unable to read some of the words on the page and how discouraging to be presented with word that they have no chance of decoding successfully, even if they can recognise a few of the letters. And how can the constant halts at undecodable (for them) words and interjections from the teacher help with understanding the text?

There is still an insistence that the most important feature of learning to read is making meaning. This directly contravenes the view of the Rose Report that learning to recognise words is initially of more importance than understanding text.

According to Ms Bodman it is important that 'analysing' words does not slow down the reading and cause loss of meaning. High quality phonic work involves careful decoding and blending of each word first, then re-reading of the sentence for comprehension. This is an important difference in approach. Careful decoding and re-reading helps to embed the word in long term memory. Rushing through the decoding process in order to preserve 'meaning', will do nothing to help the child read the word more easily next time it is encountered.

Even if some attention is given to decoding, the old, deeply flawed, strategies remain firmly in place. "Children will need to move through the teaching sequence individual to each learner that encompasses attending to initial and final letters, inflection breaks, syllable breaks and prefix or suffix breaks." (Syllables, prefixes and suffixes? Hey, these are Year 1 struggling readers!) Another **essential** element of high quality phonics is that a child learns to decode and blend **all through** the word and does not 'dot about' in the word looking for bits it recognises. This is not only ineffective and muddling for the child, but it also prevents them developing efficient left to right tracking through each word, which is an essential skill for fluent reading.

We at the Reading Reform Foundation are deeply disturbed by the fact that the DfES, and the Government, in the person of Gordon Brown, are actively promoting this intervention, which seems to be continuing to use the mix of methods which characterised the failed NLS. They are promoting it to the extent that it is seen as desirable that it should be available in all primary schools. The DfES has even gone so far as to issue a booklet, entitled 'Learning from Every Child A Reader, which advises the use of RR as an intervention. The Reading Reform Foundation would like to ask if the person responsible for issuing this booklet was aware that Reading Recovery teaching of reading is not in accordance with that set out in the new Primary Framework. What is even more worrying is the declared intention of RR to 'embed' their practices in the whole school approach to literacy, through the person of the trained RR teacher in school.

From the Every Child A Reader report: "A particularly effective innovation within Every Child A Reader project has been the development of a year long course for experienced RR teachers, aimed at providing them with the skills they need to influence literacy practice at whole school level. This year, 13 teachers from all the London Boroughs receiving funding took part in the course, jointly tutored by staff at the Institute of Education and **members of the Primary National Strategy literacy team.**"

Why are members of the Primary Strategy literacy team involved in training for RR, when its methods do not conform to the Rose Report recommendations?

The Reading Reform Foundation is also concerned that the promotion of RR, and similar programmes such as Catch Up, shows no confidence in the expected success of the implementation of high quality phonic work in all primary schools. It seems that there is an expectation of failure, before this has been fully implemented. It may have been appropriate to intensify intervention in the short term, for children who have already been failed by the NLS, but all the signs are that RR means to manoeuvre itself into an unassailable position (with help from the DfES and Gordon Brown) and expand wherever possible. Has the DfES/government not taken note of the success of the Dunbartonshire project to eliminate reading failure with the use of

synthetic phonics for initial teaching of reading and for remediation? Dunbarton reported only 6% of children at below the expected level last year [10]. Are there elements within the DfES and the government which do not believe that England can achieve the same success with synthetic phonics?

What is the evidence of the 'success' of Reading Recovery in the UK?

In November 2006 Every Child A Reader published an 'evaluation' of the performance of the first year of the ECAR project [11]. It showed that children in the project, on the whole, made excellent gains compared with a control group.

However, closer examination of the evaluation throws up a number of questions.

The first, and maybe the most pertinent, is the question of the control group. As Diane McGuinness noted, in a brief analysis [12], "... there are control groups and control groups. The RR children received extensive one-to-one tuition during their second year at school, and the so-called control group, children without RR, got no consistent treatment. In fact, the description of what they received is so vague as to be non-existent".

It would be extremely surprising if a child receiving daily one-to-one support with a highly trained teacher failed to make any progress at all. Comparing this input with very little intervention, or none at all (93 of the 'control group' of 147 did not receive **any** intervention) is bound to show improvement in the intervention group, unless it is a very bad intervention indeed. Surely the results would have been more meaningful if the control group had also received a daily one-to-one intervention, delivered by a highly trained teacher or teaching assistant. As it is, it the evaluation serves mainly to show that any intensive intervention is better than little or no intervention.

Professor McGuinness also points out that, at pre-testing, the children scored an average of 100 standardised score (normal) and then are described as virtual non readers for the age at time of testing. She points out that both cannot be true. So, exactly **how** 'poor' were the children selected for the programme?

What is not mentioned in the RR Evaluation is the numbers of children who were 'referred on' for further intervention at the completion of the programme. This figure is reported by ECAR as 86 children (23% of the 373 children in the ECAR programme nationally in 2005/06). There must have been some of these children among the 145 London Borough children surveyed in the evaluation.

There is no standardised spelling test used in the evaluation. Instead, the children are tested on a measure of 'Writing Words' (p.8), with no further clarification. It is stated that at the end of the programme the RR children could write 'more than 45 words' at the end of the programme (p.14). It further says that 'Children able to write correctly around 45 frequently occurring words have become fluent writers for their age' (p.14). This leads one to believe that the children were tested on writing the 45 YR/1 High Frequency Words. Not only does mastery of these words not indicate an ability to write fluently, as it would enable the children to write only text which contained these words, but the children are very likely to have been intensively coached in these words in their normal class teaching in order to reach one of the objectives in the Primary Framework. A standardised spelling test would have been a more useful indicator of the children's general spelling achievement. It has been argued that performance in spelling gives a truer picture of children's reading ability as they must be able to read words that they can spell [13]. It is noticeable that the Sounds-Write data show that even the poorest children in YR (16.7% who scored below the baseline in spelling) had a mean spelling age (SA) 2.5 months ahead of chronological age (CA) at the end of Year 1.

I have earlier touched on the use of RR levelled books as a measure of reading success. This is an example of words found in a Band 5 text (RR levels 12-14): *video, camcorder, anniversary, policewoman*. The L15 text shown in the RR evaluation contains 'competition' and the L15 text example in the ECAR report contains the word 'policewoman'. These are surprisingly complex words for a 6 yr old previous 'non reader' to decode independently, even after a daily 5 minute 'phonics' session. It may well be that the impressive gains in 'Book Levels' made by the RR children are due to the fact that the children were given levelled books to read as part of their RR sessions and, with several re-readings, have memorised many of the words as 'wholes' and also whole portions of the text.

How does this compare with children receiving high quality phonics instruction?

In the preamble to the evaluation a comparison is made with 'early phonic training' studies (Hatcher, 2006, 'Reading Intervention' and Johnston & Watson, 2005, Clackmannanshire). It is claimed that the children in these studies had 'less

challenging problems' and even that some were deliberately excluded from studies. This seems an extraordinary claim, in particular in regard to the Clackmannanshire study, which was deliberately sited in an area of social disadvantage and placed the most disadvantaged children in the synthetic phonics group. It also did not exclude any children [14]. The Clackmannanshire study shows only 2.7% and 4.3% of children significantly 'behind' on reading and spelling respectively at the end of Primary 2, and this without **any** intervention. (The actual numbers were 7 out of 251 and 11 out of 253.) Similarly, Dr Jonathan Solity [15] reports that in a study comparing extremely disadvantaged schools in Essex, where ERR was implemented, with schools using the NLS (Solity & Deavers et al 2000), the typically lowest 25% in the experimental groups had reading ages (RAs) only 6 -9 months behind their CAs, but 12 months ahead of comparison low achievers, and that the incidence of children perceived to have special educational needs (SEN), a usual consequence of children failing to learn to read, fell from approximately 20-25% to 2-5%. Sounds~Write data [16] shows only 11% of children significantly behind in reading (RA 6 months or more below CA) at the end of Year 1.

The mean of the final WRAPS test (a diagnostic assessment of word recognition and phonic skills) given to the 89 RR children is 75 months (6y 3m), still below their mean CA of 6y 5m (mean 5y 7m, Sept 05 plus 10 months to July 06). The entire cohort of children in the schools receiving RR only achieved a mean WRAPS score of 77.5 months (6y 5.5m) at the end of the 10 month period. This is very slightly ahead (0.5m) of CA (6y 5m). In contrast, the Clackmannanshire children, who started from a lower base of Word Reading Age 57m (CA 60m), had a mean word Reading Age of 76m (CA 65m) after only 4 months of synthetic phonics instruction. Sounds~Write children had a mean Word Reading age of 83months (6y 11m; mean CA 6y 3m) at end Y1 with only 11% at more than 6months below CA (no data for YR). Although this demonstrates that high quality phonics programmes can achieve excellent results, with fewer struggling readers, it also says something about the initial reading programmes used in the RR schools: that 24% of their children are achieving so poorly after 10 months of reading instruction in YR. That these programmes were not high quality phonics programmes is evident from the results of the 'Teachers Beliefs about Literacy teaching and learning' questionnaire (Appendix to the Evaluation). It is concluded from the responses to the questionnaire that "...class teachers in this London sample ...are within a middle band who could be said to adopt a balanced approach towards teaching and learning in literacy". A 'balanced approach' to Literacy teaching is the approach promoted by the old NLS and is not compatible with high quality phonics teaching.

Cost of RR

It is well known that Reading Recovery is a very expensive intervention. It is estimated that it costs about £2,500 per child. ECAR produced a long report justifying the cost of the intervention with reference to the long term costs of reading failure. Long term costs are a legitimate concern. The RRF contends, however, that the cost of intervention is reduced as a direct result of the use of high quality phonics. Firstly, data from schools using high quality phonics show that far fewer children are underachieving at the end of the first year of instruction and so less intervention is needed. Secondly, the Rose Report recommends that intervention for those children who need it should involve at all stages "High quality phonic work, as defined by the review", and so money should not be spent on interventions that do not conform to this criterion. Thirdly, the intensive, expensive training given to RR teachers is unnecessary; it is possible to train teachers and competent teaching assistants in the principles and practice of high quality phonics instruction in a matter of days. Once stripped of the mystique which surrounds whole language/mixed methods of reading instruction, the process of providing extra high quality phonics teaching for children who need extra help is straightforward and simple. It does not need expensive resources. The entire Dunbartonshire Literacy project, which has, to date, reduced 'reading failure' to 6% [17], costs £93 per child taken over the first three years of education.

Lessons from abroad

England is not the first English-speaking country to reach the conclusion that Whole Language/ mixed methods teaching of reading has been the driving force behind the fall in standards of literacy. In the US the No Child Left Behind Act 2001 mandated the use of reading instruction programmes based on 'scientifically based reading research' (SBRR). The implementation of this mandate is proving difficult, as whole language/ balanced literacy programme developers attempt to qualify their programmes for Reading First funding by claiming that they contain the necessary components to satisfy the legislation. We have already seen that Marie Clay, the author of RR, has stated that she would "rewrite the description of Reading Recovery's components in such a way as to bring it into compliance with the Reading First legislation" while refusing to amend her programme to include a systematic, explicit phonics component. Louisa Moats, one of the foremost reading experts in the US, in her recently published paper, 'Whole Language High Jinks' [18] demonstrates that, despite the claims of programme developers and sellers, many 'balanced literacy' programmes are being given funding on: (a) the strength of the description of their components and (b) the lack of sufficient expertise in school administrators to be able to identify programmes which conform to the criteria. We should learn from the US experience, not ignore it.

The DFES has abandoned its original plan to 'kitemark' high quality phonics programmes, relying instead on the expertise of practitioners to apply the criteria and choose an appropriate programme. However, we can see no reason why the DFES should be ignoring its own criteria and actively promoting interventions which contravene them. The DFES refuses to name or promote high quality phonics programmes for initial reading instruction; it should maintain consistency by similarly refraining from naming or promoting intervention programmes. If it feels that it must alert teachers to intervention programmes it should confine its guidance to programmes in which the key element is high quality phonics and ensure that no other part of the programme contains elements which have been superseded by the Rose Report Findings.

[1] For further information see:

<http://www.ednews.org/articles/2484/1/evidence--based-research-on-reading-recovery/Page1.html>

[2] Salvato, N. (2006), "R" Stands for Reading Rat Race - *Ed.News Oct 2006*

<http://www.ednews.org/articles/3227/1/quotRquot-Stands-for-Reading-Rat-Race/Page1.html>

[3] *Every Child A Reader: the results of the first year...* <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/schools/ecpe/readingrecovery/ECR.pdf>

[4] <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmsctech/900/900we24.htm>

[5] www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/learning_and_teaching/pri_fw_k_heads/pri_fw_k_heads_bklt_0200906.pdf

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Alan Johnson Welcomes Pre-Budget Report

Press Release:

06 December 2006

Welcoming the Chancellor's Pre-Budget Report, Education and Skills Secretary Alan Johnson said:

"Education has always been top of the Government's agenda. Today's announcements in the Chancellor's Pre-Budget Report reinforce the importance of our reforms and the determination to continue improving the educational and training opportunities of children, young people and adults up and down the country.

"I am today announcing that the Every Child A Reader programme will be rolled out nationally building on the excellent results we already have seen in our pilot which is currently helping 5,000 children. The extension will mean that 30,000 boys and girls will benefit from the programme by 2010, with special catch up tuition to improve their reading skills. Funding for the Bookstart scheme will mean that all children starting primary school at age five and moving to secondary school at age 11 will get free books.

"This will build on our success in helping more primary school pupils than ever before master the basics, with 95,000 more 11 year olds making the grade in English than in 1997.

"We can announce extra funds for secondary schools where the learning gap between boys and girls is greatest. This will enable schools to implement more mentoring, personalised learning and small group tutoring helping to ensure that all children reach their full potential and improve their life chances.

"We continue to invest in the infrastructure of our schools and colleges. The record capital investment announced today will

rebuild and refurbish all secondary schools in the country and includes £600 million for capital investment in Further Education underpinning our commitment to vocational training and skills development.

“This is crucial to enable us to take forward our specialised diplomas for 14 to 19 year olds. This investment also plays a key part as we work with employers and individuals to drive up skills so that we have the world class skills base in this country in line with the vision set out by Lord Leitch in his review.”

[This press notice relates to 'England']

1. The key headlines from the PBR for the Department for Education and Skills are:

Catch-Up Tuition for Reading and Writing: £10 Million in 2007-08; £6 million pa thereafter: This proposal will help secondary age pupils who are struggling with reading and writing, with a particular focus on boys. It will fund strategies to help all schools boost literacy skills, and 400 targeted secondary schools in selected local authorities to provide after school, small group support for reading and writing.

Booktrust: £4m in 2007-08:

Booktrust aims to help children develop a love for reading. It is supported by more than 25 children's publishers. Children who are entering secondary school will be able to choose a book from a range of titles that will be offered to them in a catalogue of books that are delivered to their school. Children entering primary school will receive a gift pack including an illustrated children's book, selected by an independent advisory panel.

Every Child A Reader (ECAR):

ECAR uses a mix of intensive one-to-one support on the reading recovery model, and a range of other small group interventions to help children with significant literacy difficulties to learn to read. Currently running as a three year pilot, jointly funded by the private sector, ECAR is helping 5,000 5 and 6 year-olds with significant literacy difficulties to learn to read. The scheme will be rolled out nationally over the CSR period, to benefit over 30,000 children a year by 2010-11.

In rolling out Every Child A Reader, we will improve the scheme still further by ensuring that it takes full account of the recommendations of Jim Rose's review on the teaching of early reading, and the systematic use of phonics as the prime strategy for the teaching of reading.

Schools Standards Grant increase: £130m in 2007-2008:

SSG and SSG (Personalisation) combined are worth £1,232m in 2006-2007. This will rise to £1,557m 2007-2008 as a result of the PBR. Schools can spend SSG and SSG (Personalisation) for any purpose of the school, and on community facilities in support of extended services beyond those that are eligible to be supported through their main delegated budget

Capital: £8.3 billion in 2006-07; £8.6 billion in 2008-09; £9.1 billion in 2009-10; rising to £10.2 billion: This settlement represents generous extra investment for education, especially schools, and enables the Government to press ahead with ambitious long-term programmes to improve at least half of all primary schools; rebuild or refurbish all secondary schools; meet its commitments on Academies; improve kitchens to cook healthy meals; and invest in technology.

Contact Details

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Press Notice 2006/0185

Debbie Hepplewhite's comment re Every Child A Reader:

Alan Johnson states: *“In rolling out Every Child A Reader, we will improve the scheme still further by ensuring that it takes full account of the recommendations of Jim Rose's review on the teaching of early reading, and the systematic use of phonics as the prime strategy for the teaching of reading.”*

We must hold the government to account as to why it is promoting and financing intervention programmes which need to be *improved* (which, in effect, means 'changed') when there are groups who have already developed and trialled successful systematic phonics intervention programmes with no official financial support or promotion. **Has the government made wise decisions regarding its selective promotion of a hitherto flawed intervention programme with its expensive and lengthy training schedule - and which needs significant changing since the Rose recommendations have been accepted?**

Is this really a case of 'who you know' rather than 'what you know'?

A-Head of the Game!

Lorna Jackson, Head Teacher of Maryland Primary in Newham, answers questions about the impact of implementing a whole-school synthetic phonics approach well in advance of the Rose Report:

- There is massive opposition to what is seen by some to be “formal teaching” in Early Years, with many ‘experts’ and ‘advisers’ opposed to introducing the teaching of reading until children reach the age of 6, as in countries like Finland. Remember the big petition that appeared in the TES recently? In Maryland, you’ve decided to go for it in the Nursery! Can you describe what you actually teach in your Foundation Stage, what the outcomes so far have been, and why you, as a school have decided to start teaching reading to your Nursery and Reception children early on and not wait until they’re older?

What we teach: In Nursery we teach a very early stage of synthetic phonics through song, rhyme, talk (e.g. children’s names), mirror play and incidental activities etc so that children learn the first 31 sounds. By the time they leave Nursery most children know the first 31 sounds and have begun to blend orally. We only teach this to Rising 5 Nursery pupils. By the time they enter Reception they are developing secure phonological skills in preparation for reading and writing. In Reception they are taught phonics in small homogenous groups through a systematic programme. The impact can be seen in our Profile results which are higher than Newham’s and the National average. The Profiles were moderated by Newham.

Wait till older? By the time our pupils are 6 they have acquired the skills for reading and writing, including punctuation and comprehension and can decode confidently. They are ready to learn these skills at an early age (Rose Report).

- How would you answer the criticisms made that it is very expensive to buy in all the resources needed to implement synthetic phonics and train all your staff and that “snake oil merchants” stand to make a lot of money out of schools?

Initial outlay is expensive, e.g. the manuals and reading stock, but that would be the same with any other structured programme. Maintenance costs of materials, (e.g. replacement of workbooks) is as manageable and affordable as with any other scheme. Training is over 2 days which is another initial outlay but can be covered by advanced careful budgeting (e.g. use of standards fund for curriculum development) and creative use of SEN money (as it also caters as a remedial scheme,) as well as using EAL money if pushed. It was a priority to raise standards for all our children; so was a *School Development Plan* priority with staff and governors support, so the money was well spent and an investment in our children’s future.

As for snake oil: every scheme is a commercial venture. Our scheme is not ‘free’ from the government but we are willing to pay for a strategy that has had a huge impact on our pupils’ learning and my staff’s effectiveness. We budget yearly to update training for staff.

- You are three years ahead of nearly every other school in the country. What have been some of the unexpected or unforeseen outcomes of introducing a whole school, synthetic phonics, systematic approach? What can we expect to look forward to?

It is not a ‘how do you spell...?’ lesson anymore. We are now able to teach the skills of subjects like ICT, History, Geography etc without children being held back by lack of literacy skills. No queues of children – all children can work independently and in partners, collaborative learning. We have fulfilled the personalised learning agenda by providing for every child’s needs. Behaviour has improved, there’s a calmer environment, management strategies that save voice, time and stress (e.g. hand signal, no hands up, 1,2,3 movement system), continuity throughout the school, reward systems, reduced planning giving more time for quality preparation, shared ethos, staff expectations raised.

- How have you managed to keep the momentum going and the enthusiasm fresh amongst the staff delivering the programme?

This is driven by the Leadership team; continuous training, programme manager is out of class and available for close monitoring, rewards and praise for tutors and pupils, governors constantly involved through visits & HT reports, parents kept up to date via monthly newsletter, parent classes in 6 week blocks to train them on how the programme runs and to support pupils with their homework, never a budget shortage/lack of resources, always kept as priority in school (e.g. Trips Week organised for whole school so programme not disturbed), displays (e.g. Fred’s World), cover tutors on standby, rml (Ruth Miskin Literacy) board in staffroom to keep staff updated and to offer constant praise as children progress, share ‘celebrations’, rml ‘health checks’ from outside provider.

- Are there any things, looking back, that you would have done differently?

The programme manager is more effective if non-class based. I would have taken her out of class at the start of the programme if I had to do it again.

- What has this done for creativity in your school?

Teacher and tutors are encouraged to bring the programme alive, e.g. dressing up, children dressing up, using 3D/real life resources, bringing Fred to life in various ways, displays, activities linked to stories, e.g. planting vegetables, making snacks, etc. Rewards and celebrations are getting more and more interesting, e.g. linking to what is topical in the media and various cultures. Tutors have more time to be creative due to reduced planning demands.

- How has teaching all children to read impacted on special needs and on behaviour? Do you use any other programmes or approaches with your “Wave 3” children? Do you have any “Wave 3” children!?

We do one-one work instead in the afternoons for children who need extra support. This is also a planned programme closely monitored by the programme manager and SENCO. **None of our pupils now leave Maryland ‘functionally illiterate’!** There are no behaviour issues during the sessions.

- What impact has using this approach had on EAL pupils and newly-arrived mid-phase admissions, as some advisers maintain that synthetic phonics does not allow enough time for an emphasis on speaking and listening?

EAL pupils are achieving better than Newham average. Ofsted has validated the high achievement of our mid-phase and EAL/EMA pupils (see report Nov 06). We have also had a letter of praise and acknowledgement from the LA’s Head of the Inclusion Team, Barbara Burke, on the high achievement of these pupils. Mid-phase admissions are assessed on their day of entry and by the next day are placed in appropriate group according to their ability. Collaborative learning is fundamental to the programme so there are far more speaking and listening opportunities than there were before.

- Do you have a gender gap?

No, research done by a University of East London graduate in 2005 showed there were no differences in boys’/girls’ achievement. Also PANDA data validates this.

- How have boys responded to the structured sessions?

Very well. Boys respond well to active partner work, total engagement, enjoyment due to interesting texts which are written with boys in mind (mischievous stories), pace of session, consistency – no gaps to fall through to de-motivate, children know exactly what to expect, can use aids such as grapheme charts independently, all learning styles taken into account and catered for, celebrations, structure reduces ‘down time’. Working at their level ensures achievement which is fulfilling and boosts self-esteem.

- There’s lots of talk about learning styles and personalised learning. How does this agenda fit with your school’s approach to the teaching of reading?

It is the epitome of personalised learning, a complete match for all learning styles!

- What has been the most satisfying aspect, for you, of your three years of being a ‘rebel and outcast’?!

Watching children achieve to their full potential and beyond some people’s expectations. Being vindicated – opposition in some cases has now turned to admiration and support. Having influenced so many other would-be rebels. No longer having to keep phonics in the closet!

- Have you any data you would be willing to share?

Our KS1 SATs results 2006: 83% of pupils who had received rml from YR achieved level 2+

In Foundation Stage, the end of year result has climbed steadily since 2003 to CLL (Communication, Language and Literacy) average Scale Points of 7.3 in 2006, now 28% above the Newham average. In addition, the number of pupils leaving Reception with 8SPs in CLL or more has risen dramatically to 35% in 2006, well above both the national and LA average.

Report on how a large school has implemented the use of Synthetic Phonics as the main method for teaching reading and spelling

Pat Kerton
Deputy Head

School Background Statement

Harmans Water Primary School is very large compared with most schools for children aged between three and eleven. The 600+ children are organised into 21 classes and a nursery, with our Reception children all starting in September for the first time in 2006. Pupils come from a broad range of backgrounds and most live either on the immediate estate or nearby ones. The number of pupils receiving free school meals is 8.1%, below the national average, but a significant proportion come from homes with relatively low incomes. The proportion of pupils on the school's register of special educational needs is 14.4%, which is broadly in line with the national average. However, pupils enter the school with attainment that is, on balance, below average and many have significant weaknesses in language skills. For this reason our main focus is on raising achievement in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy with writing being a main focus for the last six years. During this time achievement in writing has improved dramatically with our pupils often attaining a higher level for writing at Key Stage 2 than in reading. Many local schools have visited us to look at what we are doing.

In the Beginning

Shortly after joining the school in April 2004 I became concerned that phonics did not seem to be taught consistently or systematically in Foundation and Key Stage 1. In Foundation, when asked about phonics, staff claimed to be using the Jolly Phonics scheme and had been for a number of years. In year 1 and year 2 the 'Searchlights' approach was being used for writing and spelling and phonic work suggested in the Literacy Strategy followed. From lesson observations it became clear that staff using the Jolly Phonics scheme were not using a synthetic phonics approach and that staff in Key Stage 1 were using something different and in conflict with the Foundation Stage. There was no consistency or building on prior knowledge and staff had a limited understanding of how a thorough understanding of phonics would impact on pupil reading and spelling.

A whole staff inset was held on 9th Feb 2005 in which I explained the principles of using a synthetic phonics approach and the benefits of the multi-sensory approach of *Jolly Phonics*. Staff included Foundation, Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2, the on-site Pre-School and all Learning Support Assistants. Everyone could see the sense and logic in it but also understood we had a huge task to make our approach consistent not only from teaching staff but also from parents. It was going to mean big changes to the way we introduced early reading in the school and would require some financial commitment. Everyone agreed that this would be a valuable investment of time and money as it would support and enhance our already good work in developing early writing but also have a positive impact on reading. Although not all of the staff were convinced they agreed to give it a go.

Over the next year we set about training staff and parents and embedding the practice in the school, initially focusing on Foundation and Key Stage 1. We created staff experts in years 1, 2 and 3 who modelled lessons and supported colleagues. We did peer coaching so that teaching and support staff were learning alongside each other and we accessed any available information on synthetic phonics on the internet including the RRF and Debbie Hepplewhite's website, www.syntheticphonics.com. Whenever a member of staff found a relevant article it was sent round to everyone by email including the Key Stage 2 staff. This promoted valuable professional dialogue about the best approaches and methods. We also made links with Elizabeth Nonweiler, a member of the RRF. She looked into the impact of training in phonics on perceptions and understanding of staff. She provided whole staff inset and group training for LSAs.

For parents we had special information sessions, some evening and some daytime with a crèche. This covered all the parents who were interested but we needed everyone to hear about it, so we began to take every opportunity with a captive audience to talk about synthetic phonics. The Head Teacher and I would do a double act of demonstrating the phonemes and actions, we would stress the use of the correct sound and explain about blending and segmenting. Once teachers became confident they had phonic drop-ins first thing in the morning. They would stand at their door in the morning and say, 'Good morning Mrs Smith have you seen how we teach phonics yet? Come in it will only take 10 minutes and it will help you support your child at home!' Pretty soon not only were the teachers buzzing about this fantastic new method but the parents were too. They saw rapid

progress in their children's abilities to read and write with confidence; some talked about their own problems with reading and spelling and wished they'd been taught this way.

One of the major changes that we had to make was to the early reading scheme. Previously we had used Oxford Reading Tree right through the school. A lovely scheme but not based on a phonetic approach. We sought advice from other schools who had made these changes on what books to use. Debbie Hepplewhite came to visit us with a selection of schemes that could be used and we set about purchasing the reading resources that we needed. We even set the staff a challenge to rewrite the text for some of the early ORT books so that it would be decodable for the children and had a small group of parents who were cutting and sticking the new text into the books! We worried about parent reaction to not having reading books immediately in the Reception classes but we did not have one complaint. The phonic games practising blending, segmenting and writing that went home were fully supported.

Our Key Stage 1 Literacy Manager then set about writing a scheme of work for the teaching of early reading based on the new phonics banding we created of red, orange and green. Once children reached the green banding level they would be ready to jump off into the normal bookbanding system of reading books used by most schools. What we found immediately was that the children who had started with the new system in Reception or year one were entering the bookbanding system at a higher level (orange) than they would previously have attained in the same time on the old system.

Members of staff in year 2 were so impressed with the impact on their current year who had only had the systematic approach since they came into year 2 that they said they couldn't wait to get the year 1 cohort who had already had a whole year of good synthetic phonics teaching.

By the end of the academic year 2005-2006 the use of synthetic phonics and the new reading scheme was established in Foundation and Key Stage 1 and had also been used effectively in year 3 led by the Key Stage 2 Literacy Manager. Towards the end of the year staff in year 4 watched model lessons in year 3 and 2 to prepare them for their new cohort who would be confident using the method. Our task was to now make the Key Stage 2 staff as confident as the Foundation and Key Stage 1 staff in building on the pupils' prior learning in phonics. The Literacy Manager moved from year 3 to year 5 where she could support staff developing this teaching and all year leaders were sent on a course run by Jaz Ampaw-Farr of 'Which Phonics'. This was just the catalyst they needed. They could now see how this essentially 'infant' scheme actually impacted on their year group and the benefit of continuing to build on the pupils' phonic skills. You can now walk into any class at Harmans Water from Nursery to Year 5 and see displays to support the skills of synthetic phonics. With the support of the Literacy Managers, Year Leaders have re-written the word level section of the strategy and are using this to teach with regular 'snappy lessons' to build pupils' capacity for using phonics in spelling and reading.

We can already see the impact on pupil learning from tracking data. At the end of year one in 2005 65% of pupils were below average for reading and 35% average or above. At the end of year one in 2006 45% were below average and 55% were average or above. This is a significant shift comparing two cohorts with a fairly similar potential. The only difference between the two was that the 2006 cohort had two good years of synthetic phonic teaching.

Many comments have come from staff expressing the big impact that this has had on reading and writing skills. In Foundation Stage, staff feel that children are definitely moving on more quickly and are not afraid to tackle any word. There have been some delightful moments reported by the office staff of small children coming with messages and sounding out the names on doors to check if they are in the right place! In year two, colleagues feel that it has given all the children greater confidence in writing and reading skills and that the progression to reading books which are not purely phonic has been seamless because children are not afraid to pick up anything and have a go at reading it. In Key Stage two the use of synthetic phonics has particularly boosted the confidence of the less able who are never stuck because they know where to look for help with displays in every room of the complex code. For the more able the knowledge of the complex code has enriched their approach to spelling. Finally the year 6 leader commented recently that for the first time in his experience at the school he is not afraid to ask any child to read out loud because all have good decoding skills. This is a year group that has not had the consistent input right from the beginning, only a little bit in their last two years. Just imagine how a year 6 will be performing with consistent teaching right from the beginning. We await the first cohort who has had consistent phonic teaching throughout their schooling to reach year 6 with great excitement!

Tensions in the Early Years

Debbie Hepplewhite

There are growing tensions in the Early Years (pre-school) and they are multifold:

1) The Rose Report steps on the toes of influential Early Years advisers and they don't like it. Rose has entered their domain. Wendy Scott headed up a petition of 100 'experts' published on a Times Education Supplement (TES) blog under the title 'Experts slam the phonics enforcers'.

www.tes.co.uk/blogs/blog.aspx?path=/Speakers%20Corner/&post=2313819

These experts are clearly making their stand but fortunately there *are* so many parents and teachers who have experienced the mixed methods/balanced approach and then compared this to subsequent synthetic phonics teaching practice that many representative people were able to express their support of the synthetic phonics approach. This petition does indicate, however, the battle ahead to bring evidence-based teaching into the Early Years and forewarns parents to be vigilant as to future practices in the pre-schools.

2) The government's statutory Foundation Stage Profile pre-school assessment system is excessive in its requirements and fails to distinguish between 'goals to aspire to' and 'goals to attain'. To manage the profile as officially demanded is onerous to say the least. It is badly designed and a logistical nightmare. The associated FSP formal monitoring and moderating regime has skewed early years practice with its over-emphasis on observing, assessing and evidencing judgements with paperwork and photographs per child. A time management study would soon confirm these assertions. We hear of many parents who are shocked about the level of recorded details of their children's conversations and activities. Many have stated that they don't want their children scrutinised to this degree by those on 'clipboard vigil' and they would much prefer their children to be interacting with their adult carers rather than being constantly observed by them. Many Early Years teachers are quite incensed that they feel reduced to 'observers' rather than feeling free to teach the children in their care. And it is a rare Year 1 teacher who describes that they actually look at the hundreds+ of bits of evidence on the Foundation Stage Profiles and find this helpful.

3) The same onerous requirements for planning and assessment are expected of all Early Years practitioners no matter what their qualifications, type of provision or pay. This is unacceptable. The government has recently introduced its Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum which will be made statutory in 2008. Are there no bounds to the interference of government in stipulating the minutiae of provision for pre-schoolers? Is this symptomatic of a nanny state or are we moving closer to total central control? It is certainly a pedantic state of affairs. In any event, those in charge of the Early Years need to understand the difference between providing detailed guidance for information and *training* purposes and the need for something *much simpler* for planning and national *assessment* purposes.

4) Whilst the government's rhetoric is heavy on *personalised learning* and catering for pupils' individualism, it is conversely *prescriptive* in its Early Years curriculum expectations, monitoring and inspection regimes. There is no respect for the individualism of practitioners and the context of different settings. Many Early Years advisers are also so convinced about the correctness of their own perceptions of good Early Years practice that practitioners are told what to do (and what *not* to do) and consequently work in a climate of Big Brother as they worry about what they 'ought' to be providing and commonly asking the question 'is that enough?' in terms of providing evidence for the Foundation Stage Profile.

5) This situation is increasingly intolerable. Following many discussions on the TES Early Years online staffroom forum, contributors decided that they needed to express their views starting with the creation of an online petition:

<http://www.tes.co.uk/blogs/blog.aspx?path=/Speakers%20Corner/&post=2357173>

It is early days for this 'coming out' of disaffected practitioners and there has been no response from ministers thus far other than through Lord Adonis's office stating that there were wide consultations to create the EYFS. So what! The point is that there is wide discontent about the direction in which advisers, inspectors and government ministers are travelling - towards dictatorship for pre-school practitioners and unreasonable expectations as to what practitioners of all descriptions should commonly provide and 'evidence' for pre-schoolers' progress. This is a sorry state of affairs and raises the question as to whether ministers really have a finger on the pulse of the spread of views and experiences of parents and Early Years practitioners.

6) Politicians with any sense should investigate the rising discontent in the Early Years domain and not bury their heads in the

sand. The 'Early Years' is far from a pink and fluffy world - it is a hot bed of disagreement, pressures, policing and unhappiness. Central government seems to have forgotten that politicians are there to *represent* the people and not to dictate to them.

7) To top it all, Wendy Scott, who headed up the anti-phonics-in-Reception petition on the TES blog, is speaking about '*Perspectives on Phonics*' at the forthcoming national Early Years conference in September hosted by the Mark Allen Group. Furthermore, Dominic Wyse, major critic of the Rose recommendations, is speaking about '*Reading and writing before school*'. The fact that there appears to be no speaker at this weighty conference who is likely to represent the common sense substance of the historic Rose Report indicates just what influences and biases Early Years practitioners and parents have to contend with. Representatives of the Reading Reform Foundation have approached the Mark Allen Group to draw attention to, what looks like, a lack of balance and representation of the Rose recommendations at this prestigious Early Years conference. The RRF was told that it was too late to change the events as these were already publicised but that the RRF was welcome to provide a stand and workshop in the general exhibition. The comment was also made that the Early Years advisers are not against phonics but just against it in Reception. Well - that has already been made clear in their TES petition. Yet again a question has to be raised, however, as to how ordinary parents and practitioners can have an effective influence - or representation - in the national domain when the Early Years advisers with *established* influence are basically in control of organising such events as the Mark Allen Early Years Conference in the first place and are no doubt advisory to many people in high places.

http://www.markallengroup.com/education/conferences/EY07_Delegate_Pack.pdf

Ordinary people are caught between advisers who consider themselves ultimate authorities on how to care for and educate our pre-schoolers and central government's advice which is policed by local authority advisers. Now practitioners have to contend with the roll-out of the soon-to-be-statutory Early Years Foundation Stage guidance *and* the government guidance and training on synthetic phonics. Practitioners on the TES online forums are describing that they already receive contradictory advice from different people in various authoritative roles. *Is this going to get worse?* The caring and teaching professionals doing the actual providing are being drowned with the details of Early Years documents and buckling under the pressures of the focus on their professional and individual 'accountability' - what to do, how to do it, how to assess it and how to account for it. This is no climate in which to work day in and day out - and it is no way to promote professional confidence.

A shining example of personal accountability

Read Kat's great posting on the TES (Times Educational Supplement) blog on 'Speakers' Corner', 'Experts slam the phonics enforcers' (13 Jan 2007). Kat is a teacher from the Republic of Ireland who has stumbled across the reading debate and made her own informed decisions regarding her provision of reading instruction in her classroom -

Extract from Kat's contributions:

So many posts have left me frustrated e.g. the one about the lack of a longitudinal study as to the effects of Synthetic Phonics on literacy. I cannot see a need for this.

The following are 2 subsequent relevant quotes from andy_91 referring to my original post:

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and many teachers are regrettably over-prone to fads and initiatives and the next new thing - it's the way we've been trained over the past 30 years. Longitudinal study allows us to separate the good from the less good. Anyone who denies this and approaches something without scepticism is dangerous."

"I am also [as you would know if you ever actually read] not 'against' synthetic phonics, merely against those exponents who approach it with a complete lack of academic detachment and without the usual nod towards peer review, falsification and review over time."

Systematic synthetic phonics provides children with the skills to read and write in the most effective evidence-based way. Robust and comprehensive research is available to back up this statement for those who wish to find it. I had no difficulty

finding it myself when I first became aware of SP. I don't feel it is my job to present the facts and figures here.

I didn't turn my back on my old tried and tested methods in order to embrace a new fad with a complete lack of academic detachment and I resent any implication that I did. I spent long hours reading every possible article I could find regarding SP.

Initially I was totally aghast at claims that the mixed methods that I had been using for 16 (spent in YR/Y1) of my 24 years as a teacher (in the same school) might have been flawed and that there may be a better way. The more I researched, the more I began to believe that this indeed was correct.

I initially approached each new article hoping to find something to allow me to dismiss SP as a fad - allowing me to continue in my cosy little routine whereby the children who were always going to learn to read eventually would do so, and those who would struggle would also do so, despite my best efforts.

Incidentally, my best efforts involved following an intensive one-to-one reading programme, which I devised based on the individual needs of each struggling reader, and which I implemented at any possible free time including before/after school and at breaktimes. Individual follow-up homework was carried out nightly by the parents. While some of those early struggling readers caught up, unfortunately a percentage continued to have difficulties and eventually arrived, disheartened and frustrated, at the door of the learning support teacher.

I had a lot to lose, potentially, if I were to make a major change in my methods (what if it failed?) and had very little to gain personally - but these weaker children were the ones who stood to benefit and I owed it to them to try.

Changing to SP also involved an enormous amount of extra work - planning, reorganizing, arranging parent information meetings, ongoing research, sourcing resources, seeking funding and convincing others. I do have a life outside school and this was going to affect my free time to enjoy that life. Again this was not a burden I took upon myself on a whim. Firstly I had to convince my principal to allow me to trial this method. Obviously this is not something she could agree to without a convincing argument. Once she was on board I then had to meet the parents and explain to them that I was turning away from most of the instructions I had previously given them about how best to help their child to read and write. This was a difficult thing to do. What professionals would put themselves in such a situation without first fully equipping themselves with the necessary information to confidently answer the myriad of questions that would inevitably arise - especially considering that I had already taught many older siblings using mixed methods?

The parent body trusted my judgement that SP may be the better way.

Today, I can confidently say that SP is the better way and that all the parents/guardians involved will testify to its amazing success. Their children are well on the way to becoming independent, confident and competent readers and writers. The level of achievement in reading and writing skills in my class since changing to SP surpasses anything I've ever seen in a comparable mixed method taught age group and I consider myself highly qualified to testify to this. The children themselves are very aware of their achievements to date and are full of self-esteem and confidence. There is no hint of failure in the class and what a wonderful atmosphere has been created!

My reason for saying that I don't see a need for a longitudinal study on the effects of SP on literacy is this - once the children have the skills to competently read and write then, simply put, SP has worked. Surely a longitudinal study on its effects on literacy is unnecessary. The latest UK government guidance, based on the Rose Report, is that phonics teaching should be substantially finished within the first two or three years of school. Once the children can read and write independently we don't have to keep using SP just as in the same way as when a child can ride a bike we don't have to keep teaching them how to do so!

SP is the key to the door into the world of literacy. Once they have turned that key it has served its purpose and they can move into the wonderland where imagination and creativity are fired and inspired, vocabulary and comprehension develop accordingly, personal interests are researched and developed, writers write confidently for a variety of purposes and audiences. Literacy teaching from here on involves, as I stated in my original post, providing a nurturing environment in which the children are given reasons, opportunities, challenges and encouragement to use their reading/writing skills to develop and to express their receptive, expressive, cognitive, emotional and imaginative skills, does it not?

Please don't let another generation of children suffer awaiting the results of a longitudinal study which I firmly believe will vindicate both myself and the many thousands of others who have found "the way".

Editors' comment: We are thankful that there are individual 'Kats' around the world. Those in positions of authority need to give such people the support they deserve and actively worked towards the provision of evidence-based systematic phonics teaching for beginning instruction *and* intervention for *all* ages where required. We need action and not lip-service.

Next issue of the RRF newsletter may include:

- It is clear from this issue of the RRF newsletter that the RRF has grave worries regarding Gordon Brown's pledge to promote and fund the *Reading Recovery/Every Child A Reader* intervention programme. We shall outline further the many serious and unacceptable issues arising from this and hope to have a number of responses to report. Having been unsuccessful thus far, we would like to acquire the training literature for the *Every Child A Reader* programme to ascertain just how close it is in line with the Rose recommendations and how the contents, training programme and results compare with existing successful synthetic phonics intervention programmes.
- Still focusing on this topic as it is so important, we also plan to include Maggie Downie's article, **A Review of 'Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals - Part Two Teaching Procedures', Marie Clay (2005)**, to look deeper into the roots of the *Reading Recovery* programme upon which *Every Child A Reader* is based. We shall ask the question as to whether it is sensible for the government to adopt and adapt a programme with Marie Clay's particular approach to the teaching of reading.
- Debbie Hepplewhite will continue her journey to discover the mechanism of holding her local authority to account for the programmes it promotes, the actions it takes (or doesn't) and the contradictions she has described. She will be raising further questions regarding the closing down of struggling schools and the opening of new ones including the roles played by the government, Ofsted, local authorities and the unions. To be frank, she is anticipating a continuation of *no answers* to her questions but she hopes that others may be heartened by the mere fact that she, at least, is prepared to draw attention to the inadequacy of policies, bureaucracies, unions, legislation - and to illustrate generally that ordinary people, children and adults, are often treated very badly by those who are supposedly responsible for their welfare and working conditions. Debbie invites others to describe their similar experiences and would also welcome practical and legal advice if anyone has any to offer free of charge!
- The RRF will take a close look at the government phonics guidance which is to be published imminently.
- Lesley Drake will describe her experiences at the recent *National Union of Teachers' Annual Conference*. As far as the teaching of reading is concerned, Lesley comments that "it was a desert" - and yet the root of so many fundamental problems in education stem from failure to address how best to grow a reader. What does the future hold? Will the precious seeds of early reading wither in the sandpit or will they be allowed to flourish where the practitioners have seen the light? Lesley will investigate further the Early Years tensions.
- As recently promised on the TES early years online forum, we hope to include a review of '*L is for sheep*' - the response of many 'Early Years' figures to the Rose Report - published by Sally Featherstone.

These features are subject to change according to unfolding events - and of course we will include further examples of synthetic phonics teaching practices. The RRF welcomes articles and reports about the teaching of reading and related issues for possible publication in the RRF newsletter and/or on the RRF website www.rrf.org.uk .

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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.



Subscription/Donations Form

Subscription to the RRF Newsletter is £10 per year (3 issues). As a non-profit making organisation, any other voluntary contributions are always gratefully received.

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