

## Synthetic Phonics

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## The Reading Reform Foundation

Mona McNee, former editor of the Reading Reform Foundation newsletter and well known phonics advocate, founded the UK branch of the Reading Reform Foundation in 1989. Its roots are in America where from the early 1960s to mid 1980s, the Reading Reform Foundation was in the forefront of efforts to apply research findings to the teaching of reading. In 1993, The National Right to Read Foundation picked up the phonics torch in America and is carrying the message to the nation, that direct, systematic phonics is an essential first step in teaching reading. (See [www.nrrf.org](http://www.nrrf.org))

The National Right to Read Foundation states, "If children are taught intensive, systematic phonics at an early age, until it is automatically applied to the reading process, then illiteracy is dramatically reduced, comprehension improves, and remediation is virtually unnecessary, except for very few."

The UK branch of the Reading Reform Foundation has links with similar organisations across the English-speaking world, all saying exactly the same as above, regardless of the actual materials they use to support their method. Mona McNee has gone to extraordinary lengths in her determination to inform others about developments in the UK and throughout the world. She has kept abreast of research, the pronouncements of leading figures, publications, statistics, political and educational changes. As the sole aim of the Reading Reform Foundation is to bring the phonics-first method back to the teaching of reading, we hoped that goal could be achieved within two years. We have all been greatly disappointed. People with influence have simply failed, or refused, to listen.

The archive newsletters are an excellent record of the past twelve years; like 'time photography', they replay at speed the progression (occasionally 'regression') of relevant events in the literacy domain. Some progress has been made towards a general acknowledgement for the necessity of phonics for the teaching of reading.

The tragic aspect is, that had various LEA members, advisers, political figures, and others with influence, listened to the Reading Reform Foundation supporters in the first place, many children's lives could have been dramatically changed many years ago. Phonics has ceased to be such a bone of contention, but in reality, the DfEE members appear to have ignored the research and best phonics method, and we should all be very concerned about the format of current DfEE instructions for the early years. It is natural that it must go against the grain for some, to acknowledge the whole language method is not appropriate for promoting literacy skills, having advocated it for so long. If those at highest levels are promoting flawed methods, how can we expect the trainers and teachers to understand and deliver the best phonics method?

**I would like to thank Mona on behalf of all those who know of her exceptional efforts, all the children and parents rescued by her expertise and generosity, and all the generations yet to come who will, at last, receive the foundations of the literacy education they deserve.**

*Dear Reader,*

*A few years ago, I was introduced to a special method of teaching reception children to read and write. The results were amazing. Within only two terms the reception children raced ahead of the children in year one, causing some consternation amongst the staff into the bargain!*

*I discovered that the teaching approach is referred to as the 'synthetic phonics' method. There is a vast amount of scientific research both in the UK and abroad, confirming the effectiveness of this technique.*

*From past experience, I appreciated this was an invaluable teaching approach with great potential for giving all children the best possible start in developing their literacy skills.*

*If all things were equal, one would think it would be a simple matter to inform the teaching profession of the many advantages of this method. Unfortunately, the history of teaching reading is steeped in controversy, myth and personal preferences put before research outcomes. To pass on best practice is not necessarily an easy or straightforward matter, especially with the current monopoly of the National Literacy Strategy directives.*

*The aim of our newsletters is to inform you of the benefits of synthetic phonics teaching. 'Features' range from providing research information to relating personal experiences. We will explain the technique itself, including guidelines for pace, progression and very early intervention. Results from various schools in the UK will be published to indicate the levels achievable. These will also illustrate that where different resources have been used, both commercial and in-house, the results are attributed to the synthetic phonics method. The Reading Reform Foundation does not promote the use of any specific commercial resources. We are, however, always interested to hear about the effectiveness of any phonics materials you have used in your settings, as they can play an important role in delivering synthetic phonics teaching.*

*We hope that you find our newsletter interesting and helpful - it may even clarify some of your own observations. If we have stimulated your curiosity, please do respond and support us in our endeavours. Future contents may be led by your needs. Consult with us about any problems or general questions you may have. Write letters for our Letters Page, or contribute an article to share your experiences. Let us know if you wish to join the research projects of Dr. Joyce Watson and Dr. Rhona Johnston, or you may simply wish to trial the synthetic phonics method on a less formal basis. We can offer advice, training and suggest contacts. Jenny Chew keeps in touch with relevant research, and Sue Lloyd, Dr. Joyce Watson and Irina Tyk are highly experienced synthetic phonics practitioners.*

*Many practitioners have described this method as 'life changing', for themselves as well as for their infant charges!*

*Debbie Hepplewhite  
Newsletter Editor*

# Phonics and me

by Sara Wernham

Phonics first made an impact on my life when I joined the reception class at Woods Loke Primary School in Suffolk. A very fitting time it would seem – except I was not a bright-eyed eager 4 year old, but the bright-eyed eager probationary teacher!

I had arrived at my first job to be told I was to have the reception class. Having just come from a middle school training course, I had no experience at all of how to teach reading. Our ‘English’ lectures at University had consisted almost entirely of ‘writing books for younger children’ - not very useful with a reception class. When asked how to teach reading by the students, our lecturer’s response had been an airy wave of the hand and an assertion that ‘we didn’t need to know that’ as ‘any 9 year old who couldn’t read was special needs responsibility and not ours’. Any further pressing proved equally useless. So, there I was – the reception class teacher with not a clue as to how to approach the task now facing me.

Adding to my problems was the fact that I had started school at the beginning of the 70s and had been taught by the ‘Look and Say’ method. I therefore had no skills to apply or fall back on. I was fortunate, (though it didn’t always feel like it as I grasped for understanding), to arrive at Woods Loke under the eagle eyes of Joan Dorr, Sue Lloyd and Ann Winslade. Even more fortunate for me was that the school had ready for me virtually the first half-term’s English work, in the form of ‘*Sound Start*’. This was the prototype of what was eventually to become ‘*The Phonics Handbook*’.

As I struggled through my first weeks not only of being a teacher, but of trying to understand what I was being told, about sounds in words, blending, listening for sounds etc., I wondered where on earth I had ended up and just what they were all banging on about. However, as the term progressed, I did learn and so, surprisingly, did my class. Gradually, light began to dawn and understanding grew. A complete revelation to me was that the letters in words weren’t just randomly chosen – they went with the sounds! Although I had always been considered a ‘good’ reader, I had always wondered how people read words they didn’t know. In books with names, for example, that I had never heard, I just blanked the word when I came to it, almost inserting a picture of the word to represent it in my head. I now realise that I am blessed with a good memory and that this is what enabled me to read as I did.

Spelling, however, was another matter and a great source of frustration to me, my family and my teachers. My memory was not so good at learning spellings. The weekly spelling test was a great ordeal, (I still find it amazing that my classes now love their spelling test). I never got 10/10 and this was regarded by everyone as a wilful refusal to make the effort and learn them. “You’re a bright girl, look at what you read, of course you should get the spellings right.” Believe me, if I **could** have done, I **would** have done. Life would have been very much easier.

I remember rows with my mother: “How do you spell whatever?” I’d ask. “Look it up in the dictionary,” came the reply. How? To do that you need to know (or at least have an idea of) the first three letters. If I could remember those, generally I could remember the rest of it. To know how to spell a word, I needed to look it up in the dictionary, in order to look it up in the dictionary – I needed to know how to spell it. A chicken and egg situation.

My mother thought she was doing the right thing in encouraging me to use a dictionary. She couldn't understand why I couldn't. I didn't understand why she wouldn't just tell me how to spell it - after all they did at school. Why was she so awkward over it? It became a standing family joke – Sara can't spell, don't ask her – unless you wanted a good laugh of course. Any marks for spelling in essays, I wrote off. If I got one mark it was a bonus, and so it remained through school, university, my first jobs and teacher training. But finally, **revelation!**

At the time I joined Woods Loke they still used I.T.A. The Initial Training Alphabet, developed by Sir James Pitman, is very 'sound' based. I had to sound out words to write them. Gradually, I began to make the links and so the transition to 'ordinary' letters and spelling patterns, just like the children in my reception class. I always say that I really learnt to read and write with my first class.

Once the initial euphoria and delight had calmed, I began to feel angry. I hadn't been stupid, I hadn't been lazy, I just didn't know how sounds and letters and words worked. All those frustrating hours trying to learn spellings. All those hours my parents and teachers had spent trying to help me – wasted – unnecessarily. They simply didn't realise I didn't understand, and I didn't know I didn't understand. Subsequently, talking to my friends and peer group I have found I was not alone. Had I not ended up at Woods Loke, I could still be ignorant and/or struggling. I still find it slightly incredible that I can now teach others to read and write, and am delighted that they will never have to go through the frustrations I did.

Teaching in the reception class at that time meant I became involved with the 'Jolly Phonics' programme. Sue Lloyd had recently met Chris Jolly, who had an embryonic publishing company, and they had just started the long journey that would lead to 'The Phonics Handbook'. I trialled some of the materials, suggested things and watched the project develop. I became directly involved initially when I contributed three drawings. I was very enthusiastic, as not only could I see myself and my class learning, but I could appreciate the 'ease' and fun involved in the learning. If a complete novice like myself could use it and get results, it had to be good. As time went on I became more and more involved, until now, much to my, and my family's, surprise, I co-write much of the 'Jolly Phonics' material with Sue.

The other thing that I still find amazing, and stops me dead, is that now my family ask **me** how worlds are spelt, and I can normally answer them! In many ways my involvement with the phonics movement in general, and 'Jolly Phonics' in particular, has been a very personal one. All the more important for me now, as I have a son [*and subsequently, a daughter – congratulations!*] of my own, and I am able to help him [*them*] in a way I would not have been able to before.

*Editor's comment:*

*It has been said that look and say, real books, whole language, or even a balance of everything, has served the bulk of our population well, failing only a percentage. I would suggest it has failed all of our children, because even those who have learnt to read and write, and who may have developed a love of books, are highly likely to have had a much greater struggle to learn to read, write and spell than was necessary.*

*Sara has contributed a touching story about her own experiences as a child brought up with no phonics. How many more teachers out there have had a similar lack of good phonics when they were children and are now arguably receiving flawed phonics training?*

# Analytic phonics makes a come-back — but where is synthetic phonics?

by Jennifer Chew

Phonics is not the dirty word it once was, but despite its reappearance on the literacy agenda, policy on the teaching of reading remains unbalanced. There is an over-emphasis on the analysis of spoken words into smaller units of sound and a serious under-emphasis on the synthesis of spoken words from smaller units of sound. In other words, analytic phonics is stressed at the expense of synthetic phonics.

So what's the problem? Either way, surely, children are learning about phonemes (the smallest units of sound in spoken words) and the way they are represented by letters and letter-groups. Well, the idea: of teaching children to analyse spoken words into phonemes is not, in itself, the problem: the problem is that analysis into phonemes is now assumed to play a direct part in *reading* (as well as in spelling, where it has traditionally belonged) and, most worryingly, is assumed to be possible *only after children have gone through an initial phase of reading words 'logographically'* (as wholes). A clear statement of this position comes from Henrietta Dombey, Professor of Literacy in Primary Education at the University of Brighton:

'Initially, whatever we try to teach them, young children recognise words as unanalysed wholes, making no attempt to map the component letters into speech sounds. [Frith] terms this the logographic phase, stating that towards the end of this phase children may well notice some at least of the letters involved. But they only start to make systematic use of this knowledge when they enter the next phase, what she terms the alphabetic or analytic phase. Here they are learning to relate letters and groups of letters to phonemes and groups of phonemes. In other words, they are learning phonics' (*Literacy Today* No. 20, September 1999).

According to Prof. Dombey, then, children learn phonics only after an initial phonics-free logographic stage, and teaching is powerless to change this sequence. Such views are unacceptable from a synthetic phonics perspective.

The reading of words as logographs or 'unanalysed wholes' is not universal among young children, as Wimmer and Hummer showed in an article published in 1990: 'How German-speaking first graders read and spell: doubts on the importance of the logographic stage' (*Applied Psycholinguistics* Vol. 11, pp. 349-368). The fact that English-speaking children manifest logographic tendencies while other children do not is often attributed to the unusual complexity of English letter-sound correspondences, which is thought to dictate a whole-word approach. Of course the English writing-system *is* complex, but this does not inevitably mean that children read logographically 'whatever we try to teach them'. There is ample evidence that they do *not* read logographically if we teach them synthetic phonics. This involves teaching them to produce phonemes in response to letters and then to blend or synthesise (hence 'synthetic phonics') these phonemes into a word-pronunciation. Phonics-first teachers will welcome the recent study by Dr Karin Landerl (University of Salzburg) showing that this can be very effective, even in English, and suggesting that it may be rendered more necessary, not less so, by our complex writing-system (*European Journal of Psychology of Education* 2000, Vol. 15 No 3, pp. 239-257).

Landerl's study arose out of an earlier study by Wimmer and Goswami, who thought that teaching methods *might* account for the differences they found between English and German children, but were more inclined to blame the complexity of our letter-sound correspondences. Prof. Goswami has in the past suggested that this complexity, combined with preschool rhyme awareness, makes it more natural for English children to use rhyme units than to use phonemic units in their early reading. In a recent article, however, she has stated that the picture is 'dramatically affected by the type of literacy instruction that the child is receiving' (Goswami and East: 'Rhyme and analogy in beginning reading: conceptual and methodological issues', *Applied Psycholinguistics* 21, 2000, p. 82). Her growing recognition of the major role played by teaching is most welcome. But problems remain: the teaching provided by Goswami and East certainly improved the children's *rhyming* skills, but did it also have a dramatic effect on their *reading*? We are told the average reading age *before* this teaching but not *after*. What useful information can we glean from the 'before' picture? At first sight, the children's average reading age of 5 years 8 months at an average chronological age of 5 years 6 months seems quite healthy — but we have to ask how much the average reading age was inflated by the decision to exclude children with 'documented educational or hearing difficulties' (p. 73). The teaching approach which produced the 'before' picture was 'a mixed program of reading instruction that included the establishment of a sight-word vocabulary (using reading schemes based on a whole language approach) and some systematic tuition in letter-sound relationships' (p. 73). Elsewhere, this type of approach is said to be 'characteristic of early reading instruction in England' (p. 71). True — but note the difference when this 'characteristic' approach is replaced, from the start, by synthetic phonics, as in the Clackmannanshire study by Watson and Johnston (*Interchange* 57, published in 1998 by the Scottish Office). The whole-class teaching of synthetic phonics, with no children excluded because of their difficulties, clearly produced better results than the 'mixed program' accepted by Goswami and East as a foundation enabling most (but not all) children to benefit from onset-rime training. The same reading test (British Ability Scales) was used in both studies:

	<b>Teaching Approach</b>	<b>Chronological Age</b>	<b>Reading Age</b>
Goswami and East subjects	sight words, whole language, some phonics	5 years 6 months	5 years 8 months (children with documented difficulties excluded)
Watson and Johnston subjects	synthetic phonics	5 years 5 months	6 years 0 months (no children excluded)

The Goswami and East subjects were then given onset-rime training in groups of three or four for about five hours spread over eight weeks. This may have raised their average reading age dramatically, but we simply do not know: although reading was re-tested after the training, the results are not given. Why not? Onset-rime training is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, where the 'end' is good reading attainment. And we still do not know whether onset-rime training works with problem readers or even with genuine beginners — the Goswami and East subjects were not genuine beginners, as they had already had several months of a 'mixed program' with, it seems, a good deal of emphasis on sight-words. The belief in sight-words as a first step is found everywhere.

Synthetic phonics may sound abstract (and even artificial, as that can be one of the connotations of 'synthetic') but it is actually very practical: synthesising gives the children an immediate practical use for their knowledge of letter-sounds. With logographic or whole-word reading, by contrast, children have to leave any letter-sound knowledge they may have on a back burner until the later analytic phase. Alternatively, perhaps, they are just not taught anything about letters and sounds in the earlier phase — which makes it entirely unsurprising that they make no use of phonics in reading, but leaves one wondering how on earth they tackle *spelling*

Most phonics-first teachers accept that a logographic start is *possible*, but would stress that it is not *inevitable*, and, crucially, that it does not make it easy for children to progress to more mature strategies. This last point is conceded even by Prof. Dombey:

'Children who have acquired quite a wide reading vocabulary in the earlier logographic phase may well need cajoling, repeated prompting and considerable support to tackle words analytically' (*Literacy Today* No. 20, September 1999).

So why not spare children the 'earlier logographic phase' and simply teach them from the start to sound out the letters in words and then blend the sounds? Granted, there will come a point at which we have to tell them that this will not work for every part of every word they encounter, but phonics-first teachers find that children negotiate this hurdle without 'cajoling, repeated prompting and considerable support'. In other words, it seems a much easier step than the step from logographic to analytic reading, which evidently *does* require cajoling etc.

Galvanized by Prof. Dombey's *Literacy Today* article and by the conviction that the logographic-reading-comes-first view was at the root of many of our problems, I wrote an article on this subject and submitted it to a different teacher-friendly publication on literacy. The article was rejected and returned to me with the comments of the reviewers who had recommended rejection. One of them had written the following:

'Most adults who have been around most children know that most children do perceive logographically at first.'

I had hit precisely the barrier that I was trying to break through! This reviewer was simply not going to allow any challenge to the view that the first stage of reading is logographic: how could I be so stupid as to question something that is believed by pretty well everyone who knows anything about children? Well, I *do* question it, and will continue to do so. Teachers must not be brainwashed into believing that logographic reading is *natural* if in fact it is the result of *teaching*, as the evidence suggests to be the case.

Unfortunately, most of the work on phonemes in the National Literacy Strategy materials leans towards the analytic end of the spectrum, frequently with the assumption that the word is first recognised as an unanalysed whole. Take, for example, the activity starting on p. 29 in the *Additional Literacy Support: Phonics and Spelling, Reading (Guided and Supported)* book. The object of this activity is given as being 'to practise reading words', and yet the procedure involves the child 'reading the word, saying the phonemes, and the word again — **thump, th-u-m-p, thump**'. This is back to front: to use phonics in a practical way for *reading*, the child should first say the phonemes in response to the graphemes (letters and letter-groups) and then blend (synthesise) these phonemes into a pronunciation for the whole word. Saying the phonemes *after* the word has been read is a type of analysis which contributes nothing to the reading of the word.

Another example comes in the Additional Literacy Support video. We see a Year 3 child struggling to read the word 'soft'. We actually hear her correctly sounding out each letter under her breath. Instead of helping her to blend the sounds, however, the classroom assistant says 'Look at the first bit. What would make sense?' — in come the whole-language strategies and bang goes a perfect opportunity to demonstrate the way synthetic phonics works for reading. One is left feeling that the people who have overseen the production of these materials simply do not understand the role of synthesising.

Teachers who *do* understand that reading is about producing phonemes in response to graphemes and then blending (synthesising) the phonemes ensure that their pupils learn graphemes, phonemes and blending first and fast. They know that they will not be teaching words as wholes and that the children may be left unable to read any words at all unless they are good at sounding out and blending. Teachers who use whole-word methods, however, tend to take their time over teaching graphemes and phonemes (as does the National Literacy Strategy), and not to put much emphasis on blending. The contrasting results are nicely illustrated in two inspection reports (available at [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)), one on Barkerend School in Bradford, which is featured in the Additional Literacy Support video, and the other on Kobi Nazrul School in Tower Hamlets, whose headteacher at the time, Ruth Misikin, was a leading proponent of the sounding-out-and-blending approach for reading. The intakes of the schools appear to be comparable in the sense that many children have limited English on entry. Here are some relevant comments from the OFSTED reports:

Barkerend: 'By the end of Key Stage 1.... some [pupils] know the sounds of letters but have difficulty in transferring their knowledge to the reading of texts'.

Kobi Nazrul: [children who have been through the school's nursery] 'start reception knowing all the letter names and sounds and how to write them'.

Barkerend [at the end of Key Stage 1] 'standards in reading are below the national expectation. Many pupils lack confidence, are unable to read with appropriate fluency and are just beginning to master key words to give them access to a range of books'.

Kobi Nazrul: 'Key Stage 1 test results match the best in the country....By the age of seven...most pupils read accurately and fluently. They read aloud with very good expression....'.

Why, why, WHY are the 'experts' not more open to the possibility that synthetic phonics first and fast produces much better results than phonics which is still dragging on at the end of Key Stage 1 and is mixed up with the learning of 'key words' (presumably as sight words)?

There are parallels between events in the BSE crisis and the field of literacy. In both cases, government ministers and the public have been misled by 'experts' (civil servants and others — some, at least, well meaning). People are rightly horrified at the eighty or so deaths which BSE has caused. What about the many thousands of innocent children who have been crippled intellectually, and/or psychologically and/or in their job prospects, by blunders and cover-ups over the teaching of reading?

# Research Digest

by Jennifer Chew

This selection reflects three important themes which are currently interesting researchers: the effects of teaching methods, the role of blending, and children's use of 'large' units (whole words, onsets, rimes) or 'small' units (phonemes) in reading.

**Watson, J.E. and Johnston, R.S., 1998. *Interchange 57: Accelerating reading attainment: The Effectiveness of synthetic phonics*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Office.** The study for which the most detailed results are given compared three groups of Scottish Primary 1 (i.e. Reception) children: the first group was taught by 'a systematic but gradual analytic method' (one letter-sound per week in the initial position of words). The second group had this same teaching plus separate training in the 'analysis and synthesis of sounds in spoken words without reference to print'. The third group (synthetic phonics) was taught at the rate of six letter-sounds in eight days and was taught to read simple words by producing sounds for all letters and blending the sounds. By March of Primary 1, the synthetic phonics group was reading and spelling about seven months ahead of the other groups.

**Solity, J., Deavers, R., Kerfoot, S., Crane, G., and Cannon, K., 1999. 'Raising literacy attainments in the early years: the impact of instructional psychology'. *Educational Psychology* Vol. 19 No. 4, 1999, pp. 373-397.** The authors investigated '(i) whether overall reading standards can be improved and (ii) the extent to which reading difficulties can be prevented'. While many researchers focus on the *natural* development of phonological skills, Solity et al. focus on the role of *teaching*. In this study, children taught by their Early Reading Research (ERR) approach were taught small units (graphemes and phonemes), blending and segmenting. The results were compared with results in schools using a more eclectic approach. At the end of reception, when both groups had an average chronological age of 5 years 4 months, the ERR children had an average reading age of 5 years 9 months while the comparison group had an average reading age of 5 years 3 months. Of particular interest is the fact that the ERR schools had far fewer problem readers than the comparison schools.

**Deavers, R., Solity, J. and Kerfoot, S, 2000. 'The effect of instruction on early nonword reading'. *Journal of Research in Reading* Vol. 23 No. 3, October 2000, pp. 267-286.** [Note: nonword reading ensures that the skill being tested really is decoding rather than sight-word recognition.] The researchers compared three groups of six-year-olds. One group was following the ERR approach (see above). The second group was following the National Literacy Project Literacy Hour (the forerunner of the NLS Literacy Hour), which put more emphasis on 'large units' (particularly onset and rime). The third group received a mixture of small- and large-unit instruction. The ERR group had the best nonword reading skills.

**Landerl, K. 2000. 'Influences of orthographic consistency and reading instruction on the development of nonword reading skills'. *European Journal of Psychology of Education* Vol. XV No.3, pp. 239-257.** Landerl followed up an earlier experiment by Wimmer and Goswami. She found that English children taught synthetic phonics were much better at reading non-words than the eclectically-taught children in the original experiment. She notes that the English phonics school, like German schools but unlike many English schools, emphasised blending as well as letter-sound correspondences. She notes, too, that even with good phonics teaching, the complexity of English letter-sound correspondences makes decoding harder for English children than for German children, but suggests that systematic phonics teaching is all the more important in English, as children are less likely to crack the code by themselves.

# A letter a day.....working with phonics

by Caroline Simms

When I started as Supervisor at Great Shefford Pre-School two years ago, I had no clear guidelines to follow for teaching the children letter recognition and pre-reading and writing skills. I therefore worked on a system, which concentrated on one letter a week. Show and tell sessions were used to introduce each letter, with the children being encouraged to bring objects beginning with that letter. This system relied heavily on parents finding suitable objects and the children found it hard to grasp the connection between say a ball, given as a present by someone's Grandma, with the letter 'b'. The older children would copy simple three letter words in their workbooks by tracing over dots, whilst flashcards were used for letter/word recognition. Then, about a year ago, a local primary school teacher suggested that we look into using the 'Jolly Phonics' system. When the staff and committee looked at the relevant material and watched the introductory video, we all felt that it was a better and more coherent approach.

The 'Jolly Phonics' system is now a well-established part of our daily routine. With this system every letter sound has a corresponding action (thus, the sound 'a' for ant is matched with the child marching her fingers up her arms like a column of ants). Thus, letter sounds can easily be introduced in a circle time, including children as young as two and a half years. To them it is just a 'game' and they are learning the basics of letter sounds without even realising it. With the older children in the group (three and half years upwards), we take a more formal approach. They begin by copying letters or tracing dots in the same way as before, but when they know their first six letter sounds (s,a,t,i,p and n) they are taught how to blend them into small words. Thus, a child as young as three and three quarters, will have built up a 'word bank' of words they can actually read, rather than just recognise. We continue to build up their knowledge of letter sounds until they move on to school.

We have found the difference with this method of teaching **incredible**. Many more children are leaving us with basic reading skills and an enthusiasm to learn. The partnership with parents is also fostered by the use of colouring sheets linked with the letter sounds, which the children take home to share and complete. The 'Jolly Phonics' system is multi-media and includes jigsaws, stencils, a wall frieze and puppets on video, which makes it easier to engage children on many different levels and with different skills. We have certainly found it a useful tool in preparing the foundations for school.

(Caroline Simms came second in a national competition for the best Pre-School Learning Alliance supervisor, sponsored by W.H. Smith and Rightstart Magazine.)

*Editor's comment:*

*Practitioners in the foundation stage may be largely unaware of what gains can easily be made using the synthetic phonics approach. It is worrying that the 'Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage' makes no mention of sounding out and blending, preferring to emphasise the largely held view that words must be initially learnt as 'wholes' and therefore reading initiated by modelling, memorisation of whole words and text, and by the use of picture and context clues. This has yet to be adequately debated and there are many signs that this is not the best advice for developing literacy skills in the foundation stage. Whole language and eclectic techniques have been shown to be detrimental in many millions of cases. Check the current illiteracy figures!*

# **A long-term follow up of the effectiveness of synthetic phonics teaching in Clackmannanshire**

By Dr. Rhona Johnston and Dr. Joyce Watson

In ‘Accelerating Reading Attainment: The Effectiveness of Synthetic Phonics’ (Watson, J. E. and Johnston, R. S., 1998), we reported our findings on teaching synthetic phonics to children just starting to learn to read. Synthetic phonics involves children learning the sounds of a group of letters and being shown how those letters can be recombined to form words (e.g. ‘at’, ‘pat’, ‘tap’). The children are also taught to sound out and blend letters in order to pronounce unfamiliar words. In analytic phonics children learn to recognise words by sight and are then shown how to analyse them. Teaching sounding out and blending to children after they have been introduced to an analytic phonics scheme is not equivalent to a synthetic phonics approach as the children have not been taught early on that letters can be combined and recombined to form a large number of words.

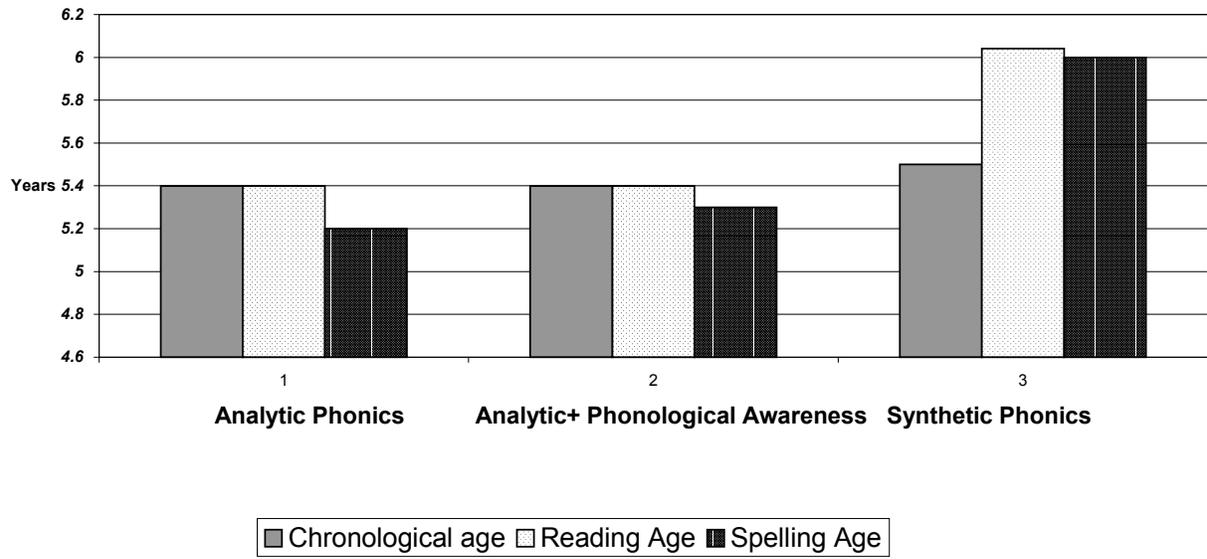
In our study, 113 children in the Clackmannanshire Region in Scotland were taught to read by a synthetic phonics method, starting shortly after they entered school. At the end of the 16 week programme, they were reading 7 months ahead of chronological age on the Schonell test.

Two other groups of children in the study had started out learning to read using analytic phonics, but after two terms of this they then started the synthetic phonics programme. In May of the second year at school, the 264 children in our study were reading around 11 months ahead of chronological age and spelling around 11 months ahead of chronological age. The boys and girls were found to be reading equally well, although the girls were nearly two months ahead in spelling. We found that only 2% of the children had reading ages more than 12 months behind chronological age, and all of these were children who had received initial analytic phonics teaching. The children did not differ overall in reading ability according to whether they had learnt the synthetic phonics method early or late in their first year at school, but some of the ones who had learnt synthetic phonics later had to have extra help during the course of the second year. However, the early synthetic phonics taught children were found to be significantly better at spelling.

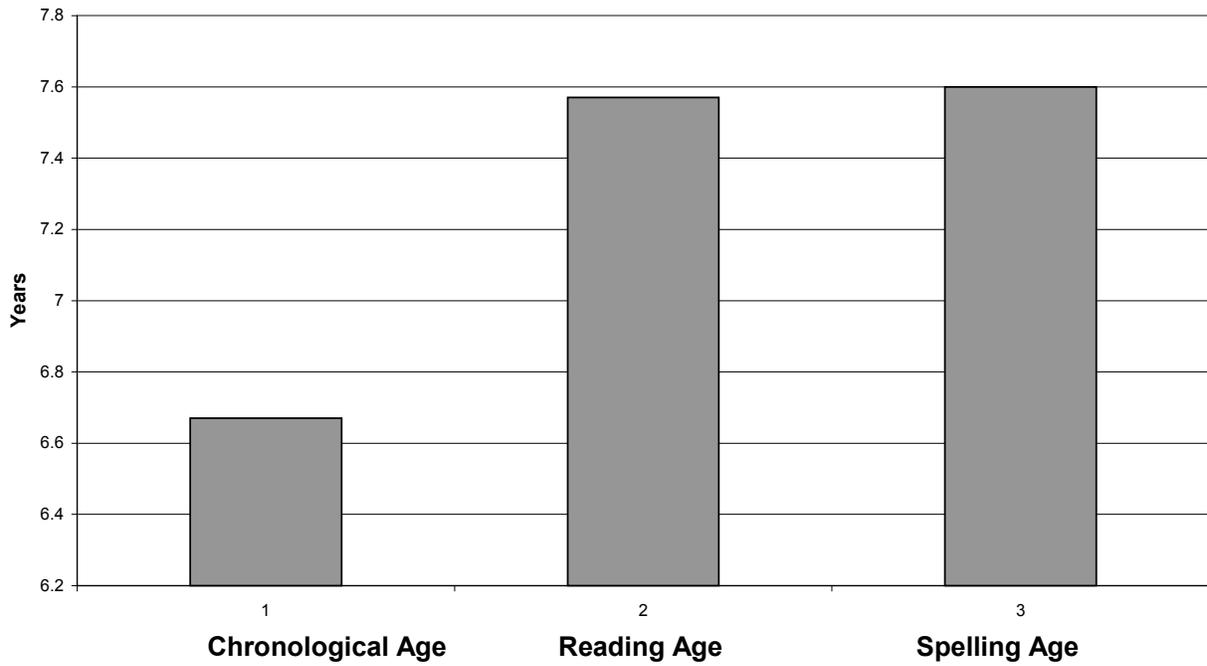
We conclude that there are long term benefits to be gained from learning to read by a synthetic phonics method, and that it is more effective to start by this method rather than an analytic phonics one, as we found spelling skills were better, and there was less need for learning support. Furthermore, when the children started reading text they had the tool of sounding and blending already available as an approach to reading unfamiliar words.

A new study is currently being carried out in a Birmingham school, and when Rhona Johnston takes up a chair at the University of Hull at Easter, she will be very keen to make contact with schools in the region that would like to try the method.

### Clackmannanshire results after 16 week programme



### Clackmannanshire results in May of second year at school



# The National Literacy Strategy—

## *A post-mortem*

by Tom Burkard

In 1999, The Centre for Policy Studies published my pamphlet which lambasted the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). The central piece of evidence was the Scottish Office study by Joyce Watson and Rhona Johnston at St Andrews, which found that children who are taught intensive phonics in reception came out 14 months ahead of those taught according to dictates of the NLS. Joyce recently told me that these pupils have subsequently maintained or increased their advantage.

At the Promethean Trust, we are now getting our first pupils who entered school when the NLS was introduced. Recently we've had quite a number of 7 year-olds who are almost totally ignorant of phonics. The most extreme case—a boy I'll call Jason—came to us in September knowing only three letter sounds, and those none too reliably. He was totally ignorant of the phonemic principle, and needless to say, incapable of blending. Part of the trade of assessing young children is to put them at ease, but Jason sucked his thumb throughout the proceedings and burst into tears at almost anything.

Fortunately, Jason's mother is a brick. Within three weeks she had taught him all his basic letter sounds, and he was beginning to blend. Jason started coming into lessons with a big smile. Now, a mere eight lessons later he knows all of the common digraphs, he can blend consonants, and he can say the sounds in words with ease. He's started SRA Spelling Mastery A and is ever so proud of himself—and he's a pleasure to teach.

Jason's school has only just got in specialist help for him, and it's a pity they didn't wait a little longer. His mother is livid. The 'experts' are whole-word dinosaurs whose efforts to undo our work are not, fortunately, succeeding.

The problem with the NLS is that it perpetuates the myth that children should be taught a range of strategies for identifying unknown words. Consequently, when children have trouble mastering basic phonological skills, teachers tend to rely almost exclusively on the whole-word and whole-language strategies in the NLS.

David Blunkett's claim that the NLS is working must be treated with the greatest suspicion. His only evidence is the improvement in 11+ English SATs results. Last year Liz Lightfoot published evidence from Godmanchester Primary School which strongly suggested that SATs are being dumbed-down. At one of our local comprehensives, the SEN teacher reports that ten of her new special needs pupils 'passed' their English SATs earlier this year while still in primary school. One of the parents asserts that the teachers read the test to the class. It is surely wrong to ask teachers to administer these high-stakes tests: it puts them in a difficult moral dilemma. Every primary school teacher I've talked to believes that cheating is rife. Do they cheat too, or do they let down their school? And what about their career prospects?

Yet it is well to remember that even if the NLS embraced early, intensive synthetic phonics, it still wouldn't work. You can't bludgeon teachers over the head with imperious dictates. With all the bureaucracy that is being heaped upon them, they loathe every piece of paper that floats

down from on high, and it's a miracle that they find any time to teach. As I continually tell my parents, no teacher wants a child to fail. It is almost impossible to expect teachers to accept that most of what they've been trained to do is dead wrong.

There are no easy answers. I have long maintained that objective standardised reading and spelling tests must be administered externally to raise public awareness of the extent of the problem. Nothing concentrates a parent's (or a teacher's) mind more than knowing that a child is x years behind. But without wider trials such as the St Andrews study, teachers will have no direct evidence of pedagogy that really works.

The power of example is potent. Tower Hamlets is now the fastest-improving LEA in inner London, and this is in no small part due to the salutary influence of Ruth Miskin's success in teaching all of her Bengali pupils to read.

Burkard, T. (1999) *The End of Illiteracy? The Holy Grail of Clackmannanshire*, CPS, London (020 7222 4488)

**Tom Burkard** started The Promethean Trust in 1990 to help other parents teach their children to read. His own son, Arthur, spent 1 1/2 years in school without learning to read a word, but he was fortunate in living near Mona McNee--who, working with his late wife Felicity, taught Arthur how to read in six months. By the age of 9 Arthur had read Churchill's *'My Early Life'*, and now at the age of 17 he remains a prolific reader, despite the usual teen-age preoccupations.

The Promethean Trust now employs 7 part-time tutors, and has 60 pupils who attend weekly lessons with their parents. Tom Burkard has also introduced their programme of intensive phonics in two Norwich high schools, and very shortly he will be introducing it in local primary schools. Mr. Burkard has written numerous articles in academic journals and the press, as well as two pamphlets on literacy for the Centre for Policy Studies. He is a member of the Conservative Academics' Group, and he is currently advising the shadow education bench on special needs policy.

*Editor's comment:*

*How big a part does whole language teaching play in demoralising some children at a very early age, resulting in behaviour problems? Rather than perpetuating the notion that children have different learning styles, which leads to the concept of 'giving them a bit of everything', consider using the synthetic phonics technique shown to be effective with virtually all children.*

*In the next Reading Reform Foundation newsletter, we shall examine the results of St. Michael's Primary School at Stoke Gifford, where the improvements made from a change in early literacy teaching to synthetic phonics have been dramatic. At the end of their reception year, children attain an average reading and spelling age 17 and 18 months ahead of chronological age. Trudy Wainwright (SENCo) and Dr. Marlynne Grant (psychologist) have fine-tuned a very early intervention programme ('Sounds Discovery'), ensuring no child gets left behind at the foundation stage.*

# The development of 'Jolly Phonics'

by Sue Lloyd

How Jolly Phonics started has turned out to be quite a long story. This first part is about how the method of teaching evolved.

In 1975 I joined the staff at Woods Loke Primary School as a reception teacher. The method of teaching reading, at the school, was the typical 'look and say' method, as well as using the initial teaching alphabet orthography. Our standards were considered good. The average score on the 6+ Young's Reading Test was a quotient of 102. However, our Head of Infants, Joan Dorr, was not happy about the group of children who did not do so well. She looked carefully at these children and realised that, even though they were supposed to, they did not know their letter sounds by the end of Year 1. She then introduced our first change of method. From then on, we always taught the children the letter sounds first, before asking them to try to read books for themselves. Immediately there was a huge improvement and the test scores rose to an average quotient of 108.

Our second change of method came through the influence of the late Dr. Douglas Pidgeon. He asked us to do his research project: the main philosophy being that the children should be taught to hear all the sounds in words before trying to read books for themselves. Looking back on this, I can see that this was the start of our understanding of phonemic awareness. The effect was like the cherry on the cake. **All** the children became better at reading and writing. By the end of the reception year, we felt that the children had made a year's improvement and were performing as though they were at the end of Year 1. On the reading test the average quotient score was always 110 or over. Best of all, there were far fewer children scoring below 90. The children wrote independently at a much earlier age. They listened for the sounds in words and wrote letters to represent the sounds. The teachers were able to read their work and the children developed great confidence through understanding that there was a code to English.

For me, this experience was a great eye opener. It taught me that the method of teaching did matter. In fact it made all the difference, and, at this stage, it looked as though the most effective way to teach children to read and write was by using systematic phonics from the beginning.

In the next edition of the RRF newsletter I shall write about the response, by the LEA advisers, to our improved reading test scores.

*Editor's comment:*

*The 'Jolly Phonics' programme is developing a reputation for its teacher/parent/child-friendly format. What may not be so well known is that apart from its apparent suitability as a teaching resource, it is the synthetic phonics method which makes it so effective. Its use will be much more effective, however, if early years practitioners were fully aware of the principles of synthetic phonics teaching. To merely 'dip into' this or a similar phonics resource whilst following whole language guesswork strategies, is to misunderstand the principles and to miss a fundamentally important teaching opportunity. Advised by Sue Lloyd, we have included a synthetic phonics reading and writing model (p. 17). This is an alternative to the whole language 'Searchlight Reading Strategies' (p. 18).*

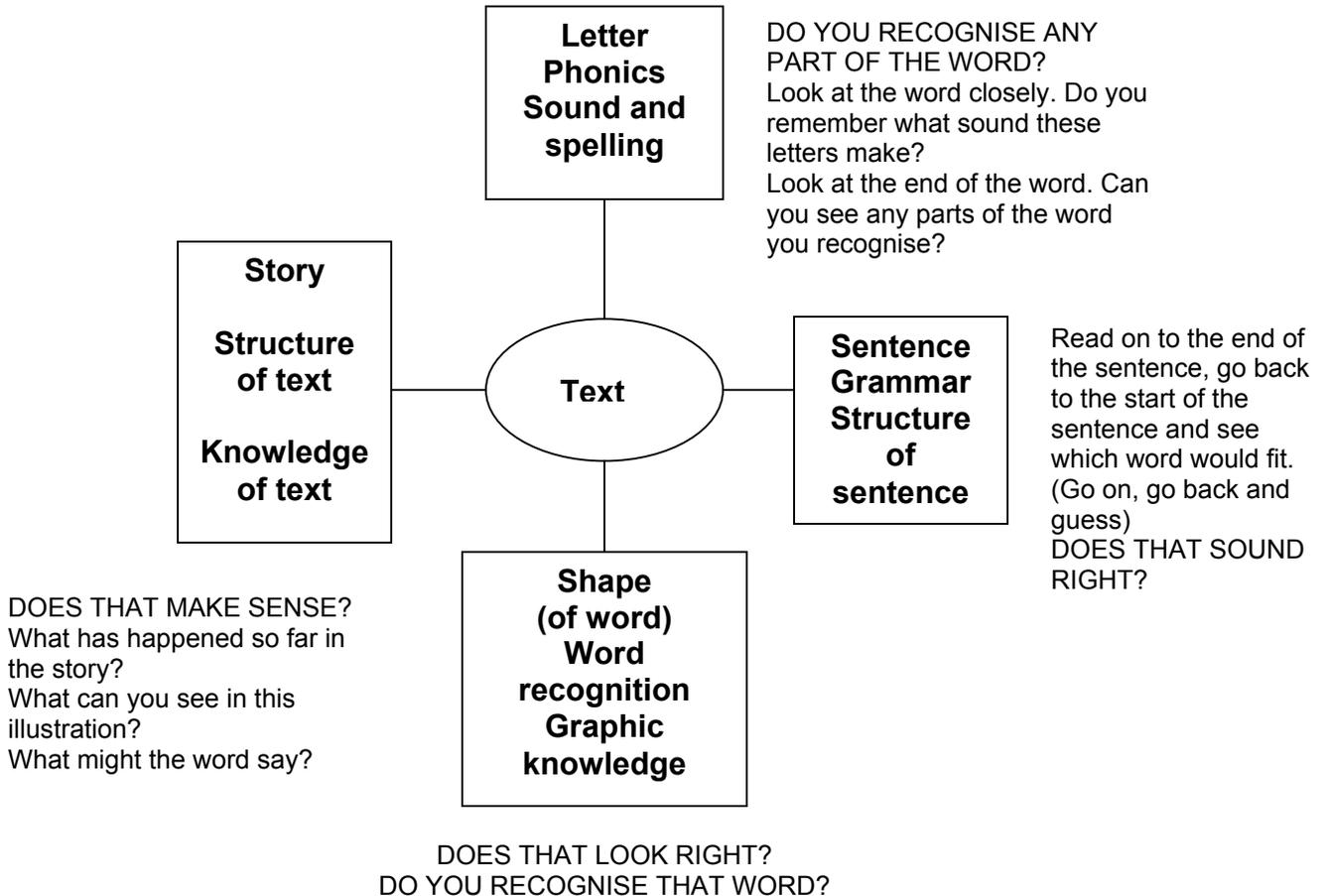
# The synthetic phonics reading and writing progression

by Sue Lloyd

	Up to 3 years	3 to 4 years	4 to 5 years	Year one/Year two
<b>Reading</b>	Hear and recite stories, poems and nursery rhymes.	<p><b>THROUGH FUN AND GAMES:-</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Know automatically which letters represent the main sounds of English (at least the alphabet).</li> <li>Know how to <b>SOUND OUT AND BLEND THE LETTER SOUNDS</b> of regular words.</li> <li>Play word blending games.</li> </ul> <p><b>DEPENDING ON PROGRESS:-</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand that sometimes we need two or more letters to make one sound (digraphs/ trigraphs).</li> <li>Read regular words (by blending the letter sounds) to parents at home – starting with regular 2/3 letter words and progressing to regular words with consonant blends and/or digraphs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Know the main alternative spellings for vowel sounds e.g. the /ai/ sound has the alternatives 'ay' and 'a-e'.</li> <li>Blend regular words using the alternative vowel sounds. Also know the technique: if the short vowel doesn't make sense, then try the long vowel.</li> <li>Use sounding out and blending to support the learning of irregular words.</li> <li>Read graded books of mainly phonically regular words to parents at home and to teachers/parents at school.</li> <li>Use the blending technique to work out unknown words (as the first and most important strategy). <b>NO GUESSING</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read graded books at home and at school – fiction and non-fiction. 'Free choice' for fluent readers.</li> <li>Read for all curriculum areas. (MAINTAIN EMPHASIS ON SOUNDING OUT AND BLENDING)</li> <li>Discuss genre of books.</li> <li>Read silently, but also aloud to teacher.</li> <li>Practice comprehension.</li> <li>Read with expression making use of the punctuation.</li> </ul>
<b>Writing</b>	Draw and colour – correct pencil hold to be taught	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Form letters correctly in the air with finger, and with a pencil on paper.</li> <li>Use correct pencil hold.</li> <li>Hear all the sounds in 2/3 letter words – holding up a finger for each sound.</li> <li>Make regular 2/3 letter words with plastic letters by listening for the sounds and choosing the correct letters.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify all the sounds in words including sounds that are represented by digraphs.</li> <li>Write from dictation – letters, capitals, regular words using known letter sounds, and sentences (made up of regular and irregular words that have been taught).</li> <li>Write news and stories independently.</li> <li>Know rules for achieving neat cursive handwriting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Write from dictation.</li> <li>Write independently in all curriculum subjects.</li> <li>Learn unusual spelling patterns e.g. silent b, sion/tion etc.</li> <li>Know and identify simple parts of speech e.g. nouns, verbs, pronouns etc.</li> <li>Use dictionary.</li> <li>Produce neat cursive handwriting and basic punctuation.</li> </ul>

# The 'Searchlight Reading Strategies'

An evaluation of LEA training and the 'Reading Searchlights Model'



*Editor's comment:*

*Here are my notes, word for word as written during LEA training for the NLS.*

*This model gives no mention to the most important strategy for all reading, which involves AUTOMATIC letter/sound recognition and SOUNDING OUT AND BLENDING.*

*It gives no indication which, if any, of the strategies should be taught first, or whether any of the methods should be dominant, or a 'last resort'.*

*There was no reference to different reading philosophies or to the findings of research. All trainees accepted the instructions without question.*

The 'searchlight reading strategies' as advocated in the National Literacy Strategy are not supported by experimental research. They are part of an eclectic approach, which comprises mutually contradictory strategies. The late Dr. Charles Walcutt, author of 'Teaching Reading' (1974), succinctly describes the inadequacies of the eclectic method as:

*....a battery of behavioral objectives that are mutually contradictory and that reflect conflicting ideas about the nature of reading. If a child looks at a picture to guess the idea of an unfamiliar word, he is responding as if the printed word were a symbol of a meaning, whereas in fact it is a symbol of a sound. If he studies the context in order to deduce the meaning, he probably is not going to look at the letters and try to identify the sound presented by them, for the two approaches depend on such different ideas of what reading is that they will not be natural responses for the same child. If the child has been taught to look at a word as a shape or configuration, he will not look at it from left to right as a sequence of sounds. If he looks at parts of words, he may see **father** as **fat** plus **her** – and there is certainly no future in this for him. When we seek to equip a child to “attack” a new word with this entire battery of clues and concepts, we are throwing him into a state of total confusion unless perchance he picks out the one right method and forgets the others as some children will occasionally do.*

(Extract from 'Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential' by Michael S. Bruner, ISBN 0 89420 292 8)

*Editor's comment:*

*There are many professionals who know the Reading Searchlights Strategies to be a flawed model for learning to read. Such an eclectic approach has already failed this and other English-speaking countries for the best part of this century, leading to the current high rates of illiteracy. Surely professionals should promote what they promote in schools because it is based on research and not because they are under duress to follow national directives. The look and say, whole language and real books philosophies were never supported by scientific evidence, and yet were readily adopted by training colleges and subsequently delivered in schools by the teachers. It is time we learnt from the mistakes of the past.*

*An increased emphasis on literacy with the additional training, resources and greater structure in our schools will inevitably raise standards to some extent, but we all need to ensure the National Literacy Strategy does not serve to suppress this alternative method, which is increasingly supported by reputable scientific research.*

**Thank you for reading this issue. Should you wish to subscribe, please complete and return the form overleaf as soon as possible. The RRF is a non-profit making organisation. We depend on your support to produce the newsletter.**

## Did you know?

There are schools in both the state and private sectors, where for many years, virtually every child has achieved consistently high levels of reading, writing and spelling skills. These schools share a common method of **synthetic phonics** teaching. Schools may use different materials to facilitate this method, but there is a specific technique about which all parties are in basic agreement. Indisputable outcomes include virtually no failure, therefore special educational needs figures approach zero. Symptoms of dyslexia are greatly reduced. The gender gap is eradicated. The method succeeds in compensating for any lack of a 'rich literacy background'. Children with English as a second language, fare as well, or better, than English-speaking peers. Reading and spelling ages are on average 12 to 18 months ahead of chronological ages at the end of reception.

**Practitioners in early years settings are entitled to be informed of different teaching methods and their results.**



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