

Synthetic Phonics Reduces Special Needs

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Dear Readers,

I have been overwhelmed by your positive responses to newsletter no. 45 from both longstanding and new friends. Many thanks for your phone calls, e-mails and letters. I look forward to receiving your research results and articles for future editions. Several LEAs have requested bulk copies of the newsletter to distribute through their internal posting systems. Sadly, others refused, saying the newsletter was too 'political'. No one should be deprived of the chance to read the invaluable suggestions, information and research results we are disseminating. Please subscribe and tell your friends and colleagues about the Reading Reform Foundation newsletter.

Just in case you are wondering – I can assure you the RRF has no political affiliations. We are concerned entirely with matters of evidence-based teaching effectiveness, justice, equality and accountability in literacy education. Why should the literacy health of our nation be considered any less important than the physical health of our nation? Yet, in the medical domain everything is tested with the utmost rigour. This is just not so in education. Fads and philosophies have prevailed over common sense and statistics for decades.

It is only a question of time before synthetic phonics programmes reach most settings. Indeed there are signs that influential people may well be recommending them covertly. This is not good enough! Our concern is that our nation's children are all entitled to it now. The longer it takes to spread, the greater the number of children who will get left by the wayside. Who would want that on their conscience?

In newsletter no. 46 we ask just how many of the children on our special educational needs registers are there as a result of flawed literacy teaching practices. When some schools lead the way with only the smallest percentages of their pupils classified as having special educational needs (following a change in their literacy teaching), shouldn't we all be sitting up and taking notice? We all need to learn from the five-year journey described by Marlynne Grant and take advantage of the experiences within St. Michael's Primary School. Having visited the school and seen the results, I have a clear vision of what is achievable for virtually all children by the end of reception and believe me - it is inspiring!

Note also the invaluable conclusions drawn in Bonnie Macmillan's article about the effectiveness of different literacy-related activities. Practitioners may wish to adjust the time weightings of their literacy programmes in the Early Years. We have included a revealing chart to compare the rate of synthetic phonics teaching with the National Literacy Strategy 'Progression in Phonics'. This should clarify the main differences and aid practitioners in their planning.

It is increasingly acknowledged that inappropriate literacy teaching results in high levels of illiteracy. It also leads to child misbehaviour which may deteriorate to the point of disaffection, delinquency and crime. One much noted advantage of synthetic phonics teaching is a significant improvement in behaviour, including that of children from the most deprived backgrounds. No one is trying to deny the difficulties of teaching children with poor social and economic antecedents, but all the more reason to ensure that we afford such children the best possible opportunities to surmount their circumstances.

We could change the picture of special educational needs dramatically - if we all had the will and the information we need to do so!

Debbie Hepplewhite

Reading Reform Foundation Committee Members:

Jennifer Chew OBE
Mike Goodwin
Sarah Groszek
Debbie Hepplewhite (newsletter editor)

David Hyams
Sue Lloyd
Daphne Vivian-Neal
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We welcome Mike Goodwin on to our committee. Mike has established a website for us at www.rrf.org.uk. We would encourage you to contact the editor if you wish to contribute to our website with examples of how a change in literacy teaching to synthetic phonics has affected your setting. Please help us to make the Reading Reform Foundation newsletter reflect real people with real experiences.

Irina Tyk has resigned from the committee, whilst offering her continued services to advise us from the sidelines. We would like to give our wholehearted thanks to Irina for all her many years of support.

Irina and her husband, George, hit the headlines in August 1995 for the outstanding success of their *Butterfly Project*. This was a crash course of phonics and grammar teaching for a group of inner-city children who were struggling with their reading. Within 10 days the children increased their average reading age by more than a year. We include some of Irina's wisdom in her article *Dyslexia or Bad Initial Teaching*, and also her June 2000 reading results from Holland House, where she is headteacher – to demonstrate what is possible with good phonics teaching.

Dyslexia or Bad Initial Teaching by Irina Tyk

It should always be a matter for scepticism what innate learning difficulties are presumed to exist on the basis of low learning achievement. Symptoms of a general nature are not diagnoses of a specific pre-existing condition. Any teacher or Head working with young children, as I do, encounters the challenge of children who fail to learn what is expected of them and it would be quite absurd to conclude that this is because they share the same pre-existing condition. There are as many reasons why children fail to learn as there are individual variations of children, and in families and in teachers.

The fact that so many children nowadays experience difficulties acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills may be ascribed to many reasons, and I suggest that the gathering incidence of dyslexia is not one of them. Of course, there are levels of dyslexia which make it more difficult for the young child to learn to read. However, it seems absurd to posit a rising tide of dyslexia on the back of the rising tide of illiteracy.

I would like to suggest that there are a number of factors, at least as important as dyslexia, which account for early reading failure:-

- The anti-intellectual culture of school, and of family life; the belief that struggle is inimical to happiness; what you know is not nearly as important as how you feel

- The failure to understand that language and reading are tools of thinking, and the failure to adopt a method to teach reading which bears any relationship to thinking and rational principles
- The widespread belief that it is not possible to learn to read English according to phonic rules
- Widespread ignorance among teachers of the 44 sounds which make up the English language
- The fact that most reading schemes currently in use are of little help if one wishes to teach children to read by reference to phonic rules
- The abandonment of whole-class teaching, and the consequent redefinition of the art of teaching
- Low academic expectations at home and at school
- The virtual disappearance of requiring children to learn anything by heart, and the consequent inability of students to commit anything memorable to memory
- The general view that very young children, below the age of seven, should spend most of their time learning through play; and that all learning which is not spontaneous is harmful to the development of such young children
- The reluctance to test children so that the gap between instruction and retention can be measured
- The rise of the computer and information technology which is wrongly believed to sideline the need to acquire proper levels of literacy
- Lastly, the adoption of the label of dyslexia to conceal the failure to teach reading effectively

Poor levels of concentration, inadequate levels of retention and poor organisational skills, in conjunction with an inability to acquire proficient levels of literacy, may well be evidence of an innate learning disorder. However, there is good reason to suppose that many children who exhibit some of the classic accompanying symptoms of dyslexia are in fact victims of acquired practices and prejudices which have evolved in response to the changing culture of education and morality in our schools and in our homes.

There is an inclination in our schools, and beyond, to view variations in how one learns and variations in how one engages with knowledge as evidence of illness or unacceptable mental irregularity. Introversion and a solitary disposition are not abnormalities which require psychological or psychiatric intervention. Unusual mental landscapes and states of mind which make learning harder are not necessarily detrimental. Likewise, poor literacy skills, more often than not, require an overhaul of teaching methods and a reappraisal of educational culture rather than a presumption of a specific learning disorder.

Holland House School - Reading scores from June 2000

Boys and girls mixed	Average chronological age	Average reading age
Form 1K 19 in class	5.01	7.00
Form 1A 22 in class	6.04	9.00
Form II 20 in class	7.03	10.05

A Five Year Journey with Synthetic Phonics

by Dr. Marlynne Grant

The journey started when I read a newspaper article about synthetic phonics in November 1995. As a part-time LEA Educational Psychologist and Independent Psychologist for dyslexia, I was impressed by the report that virtually all children were learning to read and spell, even if they were socially disadvantaged, lived in the inner cities and their first language was not English.

I bought copies of Sue Lloyd's *The Phonics Handbook* and Mona McNee's *Step by Step* and started to take them into my schools. The response varied from wariness to negativity. These were pre-National Literacy Strategy days and virtually no-one had heard of phonemes or thought that sounds in words could be so important. Instead whole language methods, real books, paired reading, magic lines and emergent writing were being used. The most structured teaching involved some phonics and sight words and the well-organised schools sent home words in tins along with the reading book.

In some of my schools there was such resistance to synthetic phonics that I thought I owed it to myself and them to look into the literature and research to see if there was a consensus about the most effective way of teaching reading and to see if this agreed with the principles underlying *The Phonics Handbook*. To my surprise there was about 20 years of research which seriously questioned the whole language approach but unfortunately these findings were not getting through to the educational establishment nor to the teacher training colleges. However, the research did support the key elements of *Jolly Phonics*.

Armed with this research evidence I felt sufficiently confident to write a paper about literacy teaching. It went to the elected members of the Education Committee of my LEA and as a result of this the Educational Psychology Service was given permission to prepare some INSET materials, to be delivered through the LEA's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme.

The writing of the materials caused a deal of discussion within the Psychology Service but eventually we produced a course on 'A synthetic phonics approach to reading, writing and spelling for Key Stage 1 staff' which was based on *Jolly Phonics*. Sue Lloyd was extremely helpful and provided us with ideas and materials from her own school. Three of us from the EPS delivered four courses of six twilight sessions each. Increasingly, as time went on, Trudy Wainwright, SENCO, from St Michael's Primary School, Stoke Gifford, became a central part of the team.

Trudy was dyslexia trained and she was one of the SENCOs who was most interested in *Jolly Phonics*. Rod Jones, her headteacher, agreed to a pilot study for one term, the summer term of 1997. The school was pleased with the results and by the end of the term the reception cohort of 66 pupils was **6 months** ahead of chronological age both for reading and spelling (using Burt and Schonell).

In 1998 St Michael's started *Jolly Phonics* from the outset in September, rather nervous about how the tiny tots, some of them just past their fourth birthdays, would cope with the pace of learning one phoneme per day. They need not have worried. At the end of the year, the reception cohort of 90 pupils was on average **12 months** ahead on reading and **17 months** ahead on spelling.

We wanted this good practice to be recognised throughout the LEA. ‘*Off to a flying start with literacy*’ was written to describe the principles underpinning synthetic phonics, to review some synthetic phonics programmes such as *Jolly Phonics*, *Phono-Graphix*, *Best Practice Phonics* and *Early Reading Research* (Jonathan Solity) and to describe how *Jolly Phonics* could be taught through the Literacy Hour.

Encouraging as the St Michael’s results were, we wanted to close the gap between reading and spelling. There seemed to be too big a jump for children from reading their *Jolly Phonics* word boxes to reading *Oxford Reading Tree*. We thought that a series of decodable early reading books, which followed the *Jolly Phonics* progression of phonemes, would be useful. We could not interest the publishers in writing them so there seemed to be no other option than to produce the books ourselves. This is how the 7 levels of *Phonics First Books* came to be written and Ridgehill Publishing to be born.

The following year 1999 with *Jolly Phonics* plus *Phonics First Books* the reading results of the reception cohort of 85 pupils jumped from 12 months ahead to **17 months** ahead of chronological age. Spelling was **18 months** ahead.

About this time we rewrote the synthetic phonics INSET course based on our experience over four years and pared it down to a one day course giving the essentials of what absolutely needs to happen for good literacy learning. We were also influenced by the work of the McGuinnesses in *Phono-Graphix*, we had visited Ruth Miskin at Kobi Nazrul School and Sue Lloyd at Woods Loke. We were impressed by the *Wilson* Programme for use with older children from the States brought over by an EP colleague who had worked there. The research of Jonathan Solity, Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson, Jenny Chew, Morag Stuart and others at York and Dundee Universities also added to our ideas.

By this time St Michael’s was achieving reliably successful results and the whole school was developing an impressive expertise. We found that children who made a flying start with their literacy in reception did not lose this advantage and went on to achieve good end of Key Stage 1 test results. Teachers throughout St Michael’s became interested and could apply the ideas in their classrooms.

Teachers attending the INSET courses fed back that they particularly liked input from Trudy Wainwright who was able to tell it like it was, at the chalk face (white board face!). So now Trudy delivers the core of the programme. Her head of Key Stage 1 who teaches in reception also gives input particularly into modelled writing. Another EP colleague and I present aspects of the research and underpinning principles.

We have delivered three of these one-day courses and have just presented the fourth in an amended form. Now we deliver a course which outlines *Jolly Phonics* principles in the morning and we go on to talk about the principles underlying *Sound Discovery* in the afternoon. This course is advertised for a wider age range: Key Stages 1, 2, and 3.

Sound Discovery grew out of the concerns of secondary school teachers who were reporting that about a third of their Year 7 pupils were unable to access the curriculum. Psychologist colleagues were also reporting their worries that some pupils with statements of SEN for dyslexia still had chronically poor literacy when they were assessed at their transition reviews (first annual review after their 14th birthday). This could not be attributed just to lack of financial resources as sometimes thousands of pounds had been spent on individual pupils. My secondary schools knew

all about *Jolly Phonics* and I had explained the principles to them. They valued this but felt the materials were more appropriate for Key Stage 1. I was also concerned to hear the experiences of adult dyslexics who had attended adult literacy classes following which they still could not read.

The 'bones' of a synthetic phonics programme emerged which would be suitable for all ages including adults and for specific learning difficulties/dyslexia and these were sketched out in *Second chance at a flying start*.

The materials to teach this programme were written and were published. It was called *Sound Discovery* and currently a Manual and a Words and Sentences handbook are available for Steps 1 to 3 of the programme.

Sound Discovery was piloted at two secondary schools with groups of about 15 pupils who had the most severe literacy difficulties in Year 7. Reports from these schools were very positive in terms of interest and attention levels of the pupils, literacy gains and success at managing behaviour. Results are being collated and will be reported as soon as they are available. Two more secondary schools have shown an interest and have started their own pilot teaching groups. The Psychology Service started a termly secondary SENCOs group for interested secondary schools and the group is growing.

Sound Discovery was also piloted at St Michael's, Stoke Gifford, with a slow-to-start group of eight reception pupils in January 2000, following an initial autumn term of *Jolly Phonics*. It was delivered by an excellent nursery nurse, four times per week during registration for 15 minutes per session. By summer 2000 the group of eight slow-to-start pupils (the potential 'tail' of underachievers - 9.3% of the cohort of 86 pupils) had improved from no reading or spelling age in January 2000 to averages of **5 months** ahead for reading and **8 months** ahead for spelling. The whole reception cohort of 86 pupils achieved average reading ages of **16 months** ahead of chronological age for reading and **18 months** ahead for spelling.

The St Michael's teachers found that the *Sound Discovery snappy lesson* format for teaching was very effective and that it improved behaviour, attention and listening skills. We now find that teachers throughout St Michael's are beginning to use the *Sound Discovery* teaching progression, the words and sentences and the *snappy lesson* in their classrooms and also for first time teaching in reception this year, 2001.

Several other primary schools are using *Sound Discovery* for intervention in Key Stage 2. We are encouraging them to collect standardised test results so that we can report them. We have heard of other schools that are planning to use the *snappy lesson* and the *Sound Discovery* phonics progression in reception from the outset. We are also encouraging early assessment and intervention in reception for slow-to-start pupils.

Training on the synthetic phonics and psychological learning theory elements which underpin the *Sound Discovery* programme were delivered at two workshops at an LEA SENCO conference, recently, by myself and a member of staff from the Learning Support Service.

An EP colleague and I also delivered some CPD INSET on the latest definition and theories of dyslexia as outlined in the recent BPS (British Psychological Society) report. One half of the INSET was theory and the other practice. The practice element outlined synthetic phonics and the *Sound Discovery* programme as an effective initial teaching programme to prevent literacy difficulties developing in the first place and as an effective intervention with existing literacy difficulties.

Our experience at St Michael's indicates that a goal of 100% success for all mainstream reception children is realistic, in terms of reading and spelling at least to their age levels. We do not find a gender gap or a summer birthday gap. St Michael's is very unlikely to be requesting statutory assessments for dyslexia for any of their pupils in the future. Certainly there have been no such requests since we started with synthetic phonics. The pupils are not without the full range of cognitive learning difficulties: severe, moderate and complex, but virtually all of them learn to read, spell and write. It is also worth noting that base line assessments of reception pupils on entering school are below the LEA average.

Further analysis of the 2000 reception cohort was interesting. The top 25% of pupils achieved an average of **26 months** ahead in both reading and spelling in summer 2000. The bottom 25% achieved an average of **8 months** ahead for reading and **11 months** ahead for spelling. As you can see synthetic phonics does not hold back the high fliers nor do we have a 'tail' of underachievement, although there are several pupils in Year 1 and onwards who still receive some top-up help to keep them using their blending and segmenting skills and to reinforce their letter/sound matches.

We are also able to offer regular meetings at St Michael's School through our CPD LEA training. This takes the form of a Synthetic Phonics Users Forum, to share ideas, deal with queries and to offer support and encouragement.

The LEA in general has come to hear of the *snappy lesson* and visits to St Michael's School to see Trudy demonstrate a lesson are growing. Visitors also come from outside the Authority.

Our interest in synthetic phonics continues to grow and we are seeing that many other schools are wanting to find out about it as they wish to replicate the results which St Michael's and other schools throughout the UK are achieving.

Since our LEA has a rising fives entry policy for reception we are trying to encourage early identification of literacy difficulties/dyslexia and early intervention. For the future we are planning to work with the LEA literacy consultant and LEA early years advisor. Our experience at St Michael's has shown that this identification can be carried out as early as the January of the reception year and the intervention implemented from that point.

I want to leave you with St Michael's latest OFSTED report, November 2000. The school's previous inspection was in 1996 just before synthetic phonics was started. Currently the school is reported as having made a 'very good level of improvement' since the last inspection and has just received a substantial award from DfEE in recognition of this. Reading the report, the adjectives 'excellent', 'outstanding' and 'very good' are used liberally. 'Provision for pupils with special educational needs is now excellent, and the very good progress these pupils make has done much to raise the overall standards attained by the school.' The Standards achieved by 11 year olds based on National Curriculum tests were A (well above average) for English, mathematics and science, compared with those of similar schools nationally of C for English, B for mathematics and B for science. There were also 'no significant issues requiring attention to effect improvements to the school'. I think that says it all.

Undoubtedly these results are excellent but we believe that they are potentially achievable by all mainstream schools who use synthetic phonics from the outset, who monitor closely, intervene early and who extend children's progress throughout the school.

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Editor's comment:

Congratulations to St. Michael's for an excellent report from OFSTED and well done to all the people, especially Marlynne and Trudy, who have worked so diligently to investigate and change their method of teaching literacy.

*It is vitally important that every LEA and school can build on this achievement and knowledge, without needing to go through their own five-year journeys. St. Michael's OFSTED report fails to note that the success in the early years was founded upon synthetic phonics teaching and not the directives of the National Literacy Strategy. The report says "Children make very good progress in the area of language and literacy because of the excellent use of a structured reading programme in the reception class." I suggest it would be far more helpful, honest and accurate to say "...the excellent use of a **synthetic phonics** structured reading programme." As things stand, the National Literacy Strategy unfairly receives the credit for all success in the literacy domain. This could prevent the best rate of literacy progress easily attainable for all children in the early years, because practitioners are unaware of the alternatives.*

What a shame that people have to resort to home printing for reading books despite a vast supply of commercial material on the market. Sadly, the National Literacy Strategy emphasis on an initial sight vocabulary and a range of reading strategies continues to give the publishers the wrong message.

"Special Need" or "Can't Read"?

by John Marks

"Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*. Chapter 6

What do we know about 'Special Educational Needs'?

There are now ten times as many pupils with 'Special Educational Needs' in our schools than there were 20 years ago - over a million and a half pupils in total.

Across the country more than one in five of all pupils are on 'Special Needs' registers - and in some schools the figure is as high as a staggering 55% or more.

Can all these pupils really have 'Special Needs'? The answer is almost certainly no.

Children with the most severe problems - pupils with Statements of Special Educational Need - make up only about 2% of all pupils. But the number in mainstream schools has more than doubled in only eight years and is now, as a deliberate policy, about twice as many as are in special schools.

But the most dramatic growth has been in 'Special Needs' pupils without statements - a category which was only introduced in 1994. Such pupils now make up over 16% of school rolls in secondary schools and more than 19% in primary schools rising from figures of 9.8% and 11.6%, respectively, over the last four years.

What does it cost?

How much does all this cost? Earlier this year The Economist, using official data, said:

The budget for special-needs education is £2.5 billion a year and rising...

Now I estimate that the total expenditure on Special Educational Needs could be as high as £3.8 billion each year.

If the money also spent on these pupils from the rest of the schools budget is included, the total expenditure by schools and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) on pupils with Special Educational Needs rises to about £7.1 billion out of a national schools budget of about £20 billion - more than a third of the total.

But nobody - not even David Blunkett - really knows how much money is spent.

What else don't we know?

That is not all we don't know about 'Special Needs'.

We don't know - and nobody knows - where the money goes or what it is spent on.

We don't know - and nobody knows - what criteria are used to put pupils on 'Special Needs' registers because each school and LEA does it differently.

We don't know - and nobody knows - how many pupils there are at each of the four levels set out in the government's Code of Practice or how many boys & how many girls have Special Educational Needs of any kind.

We don't know - and nobody knows - what types of specific handicap or special need constitute 'Special Needs' or how many pupils there are with each specific type of handicap.

And, most important of all, we don't know - and nobody knows - how many pupils with 'Special Needs' can't read or whether they are being, or ever have been, taught to read or whether or not all the funding actually improves pupils' learning or increases their knowledge.

This list of unanswered questions is far too long. Money is going in increasingly large amounts into a Black Hole of unknown and possibly unknowable size

What is the Government doing?

The Government's long promised Special Educational Needs and Disability Rights in Education Bill has now been postponed to the next session of Parliament. Even then all it is likely to do, if the consultation document is any guide, is to make the system more complex, more bureaucratic and more expensive without putting right any of the major problems outlined above.

And the problems have been compounded by the recent landmark legal decision (Times Law Report, 28/7/00) in the House of Lords which held LEAs responsible for their failure to recognise severe dyslexia in pupils and to ensure that they received the appropriate remedial teaching of reading which they clearly needed. Substantial damages were awarded. Further similar cases are in the pipeline and may prove very costly to settle.

What should be done?

The Code of Practice should be withdrawn because it is so imprecise as to be virtually meaningless.

All special needs pupils should take external tests of reading and spelling each year. If they show no progress, the 'Special Needs' funding should be stopped.

The Government's policy of 'inclusion' should be abandoned, especially if this means more inefficient mixed ability classes.

Instead reading should be taught earlier and more effectively, there should be more academic selection both within and between schools and we should introduce the continental practice of pupils repeating a year of schooling if they fail to reach the required standard.

The case for special schools is much stronger now than it was in the early 1980s especially since the development of the National Curriculum. Many parents actually prefer special schools to mainstream schools and many teachers favour inclusion in theory more than in practice.

For pupils with the worst problems, we should revive the concept of defining specific categories of handicap as we used to do in this country and is still done in many other countries.

Finally a National Enquiry should establish the scale of the present waste of resources and monitor the effects of the proposed changes. It is a public disgrace that so little has been done to shed light on such an important and expensive matter.

Professional negligence?

The question that really needs to be asked is:

Is the explosion in 'Special Needs' real?

Or has it happened because schools have failed over many years to teach properly - and to teach reading in particular - a failure which even Ministers now acknowledge.

This is a hypothesis which is well worth testing. If it proves to be right, we can all benefit. Teachers would not have such a wide range of ability to teach in the same class and could thus teach much more effectively. Pupils, especially the less able, will be better taught - and taught to read in particular. And pupils generally will benefit from the improved and more focused teaching which will be increasingly possible.

If we really cared about children with special needs or handicaps we would have done these things long ago. We would not have tolerated a system or policies which leave us in the current cloud of unknowing.

Not to know whether special needs pupils can read is not to care. And not to take the trouble to find out whether they can read or not is the opposite of that accountability which is at the heart of true professionalism. It is professional negligence of the kind which the House of Lords has now recognised for dyslexia but which may be much more widely applicable.

So let us put existing policies on 'Special Needs' to the test - in the interests of all those pupils who have over the years been failed by 'the system' by not being taught to read properly at the age when they were most capable of benefiting from such teaching and of all those new pupils to come in the years ahead.

For more information see:

What are Special Educational Needs? An analysis of a new growth industry by John Marks; £7.50 from the Centre for Policy Studies, 57 Tufton Street, London SW1 3QL (0207-222-4488)

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Classroom Research Findings and the Nutshell Programme

by Dr. Bonnie Macmillan

Since I wrote my book *Why Schoolchildren Can't Read* (Macmillan, 1992), the results of three important large scale classroom studies – one conducted in Canada, one in England, and one in Scotland – have become available. While these three studies confirm earlier findings as to the efficacy of phonics teaching for beginning reading instruction, each study also provides useful new evidence about exactly which elements of instruction are effective, and which of those are not, when attempting to teach children to read. In light of this research, it is perhaps not surprising that use of the Nutshell reading and spelling programme produces truly impressive results (reported in March issue of LIFE [*Australian*] newsletter, 1999) since this particular programme actually includes every one of the instructional elements found to work. [*Note: The Nutshell Programme is Australian – Ed*]

The study in Canada was important in helping to overcome one of the main problems inherent in studies which compare different instructional methods. Most of these studies compare the effects of method A with method B or C, but they provide no way of determining exactly what it is about a particular method that produces superior progress. However, the study in Canada which compared the effects of synthetic phonics teaching with the effect of whole language/phonics eclectic method in 20 first grade classrooms, was different. This study was the first of its kind to adopt a time sampling technique in which observers closely monitored, over a period of six months, the amount of time individual pupils spent on ten different activities (Sumbler & Willows. 1996). Interestingly, it was found that out of these ten activities, only two were highly correlated with success in reading and spelling. These two were: 'phonics' (which included all phonics activities involving print, letter-sound correspondences, blending, segmenting, detecting sounds in words all with printed form of the word), and 'letter formation' (which involved talking about the shapes of letters, writing letters and words in context of learning letter-sound relationships). These were the *only activities that mattered in terms of subsequent reading and spelling performance.*

However, equally important was the finding that six activities *made no difference whatsoever* to reading and spelling success, and two activities were actually related to *worse reading and spelling achievement*. The six activities that made no difference were: 'Auditory phonological awareness' (in the absence of print), 'sight word learning' (learning to recognise whole words as units without sounding out), 'reading/grammar' (grammar or punctuation explanations, reading by children that appeared to be real reading usually with the teacher), 'concepts of print' (learning about reading chanting pattern books), 'real writing' (included any attempts to write text), 'letter name learning' (included only the learning of letter names, not sounds).

The two activities that resulted in worse achievement were: 'non-literacy activities' (such as play, drawing, colouring, crafts), and 'oral vocabulary' (language development, story discussions, show and tell, teacher instructions). Beyond the correlational data it was found that at the end of six months, the different emphases the synthetic and eclectic classes gave to each of these various activities added up to produce some startling differences in achievement. The synthetic phonics classes significantly outperformed the eclectic classes on 16 out of 19 reading and spelling measures, and in most cases, effect sizes were large. The results showed that the eclectic classes had not learned how the alphabetic code works and were not able to decode phonemically. The eclectic

classes displayed a one standard deviation discrepancy between reading real words and decoding non-words, pointing clearly to their reliance on sight word memorization.

The most important difference between the two methods of instruction was the amount of time devoted to ‘phonics’ activities. Over the six-month period, the synthetic classes received six times as much ‘phonics’ instruction as the eclectic classes (30 hours versus 5 hours). Furthermore, while the phonics classes received only 5 ½ hours of ‘letter formation’ instruction, this was still more than the eclectic classes received (3 hours, 50 minutes) and this was enough to produce significant differences between the two groups in reading and spelling.

Overall, the results from this study suggest that rather than a particular method per se, it is the differences in time allocation to various activities that really counts. This does not mean that devoting time to certain activities is harmful, but simply that teachers must decide what is most important and at what stage if they are interested in maximizing progress. The primary focus of the Nutshell programme is on the two activities found to matter most in the Sumbler and Willows study during beginning reading instruction: concentrated learning of letter-sound knowledge, in conjunction with learning how to form letters and write simple words. An excellent feature of this programme is that some of the first ‘words’ to be written are not real words. This, helps to drive the alphabetic principle home (the idea that in order to read, every letter (or letter group) must be translated into a speech sound, proceeding from left to right), and it helps, at the same time, to discourage guessing that may occur with the use of real words. Further, an important key to the success of such a programme is that no time is devoted to activities which are unnecessary.

A second, large scale classroom-based study was conducted recently in England. This study also compared the effects of two methods of beginning reading instruction: a synthetic phonics method (combining phoneme awareness with letter-sound teaching) and a whole language method (based on Holdaways use of Big Books) (Stuart, 1999). Although not a time sampling study, care was taken to ensure that groups being compared were equivalent in terms of both teacher and pupil variables, and in terms of instructional time received. Children were measured on a wide range of abilities before instruction began, after 12 weeks of being taught by the particular method, and again, one year later.

The results of this study confirmed the findings of the Sumbler and Willow study. One year later, the greater allocation of time within the synthetic phonics classes to phonics type activities resulted in these classes being significantly ahead of the other classes in phoneme awareness and phonics knowledge, as well as on standardised tests of reading (10 months of reading age ahead) and spelling (11 months of spelling age ahead). Even though the teachers using the Big Book method did include some letter-sound instruction along with shared reading activities, the amount of phonics emphasis required to accelerate initial reading progress was simply not sufficient; the Big Books-taught children, for example, took a year longer to make the same gains in phoneme segmentation and phoneme identity ability that the synthetic phonics children had made during the first 12 weeks of instruction, one year earlier.

This study demonstrated, in particular, the need for speed of learning at the beginning in order to avoid constant struggle later on, to catch up. The pace of learning will be enhanced by programmes such as the Nutshell programme where initial instruction concentrates on phoneme awareness in the context of print (in *Sound Start*, and in the *Practical Phonics* practice books), on letter-sound learning and on blending and segmenting words both with and without print (in the *SPA Kit*, in the *Fun Fit* games, and in the *Macademia Readers*.)

Finally, a third study, recently conducted in Scotland, has received a lot of attention here in the UK since one of the forms of instruction investigated resembled, in part at least, the government's somewhat controversial National Literacy Strategy (NLS), a programme of instruction introduced to all schools in England and Wales in 1998. The study involved 13 classes of Year 1 children, and compared three methods of instruction, all of which included teaching children letter shapes and how to form them: 1) an 'analytic phonics' method (letter-sounds taught at the rate of one per week, in initial position of words only), 2) a 'phoneme awareness plus analytic phonics' method (letter-sounds in initial position in words, taught at the rate of one per week, but half the time, both phoneme and rime awareness were taught in the absence of print), and 3) a 'synthetic phonics' method (letter-sounds taught at the rate of six every eight days only in the context of print and seen in all positions of a word, along with segmenting and blending of all sounds in words) (Johnston & Watson. 1999). (Method 2 resembles the NLS instruction which includes devoting a considerable amount of time to the development of phoneme and rime awareness in the absence of print.)

The results of this study demonstrated that, after 16 weeks, methods 1 and 2 led to similar reading and spelling progress, both groups being on average one month below their chronological age, while the children taught with method 3 were 7 months of reading age and 9 months of spelling age ahead of the other two groups. In an earlier study, faster paced analytic teaching of letters-sounds led to less success than a similarly paced synthetic approach. The authors, therefore, concluded that it was not so much the faster pace of letter-sound learning in this later study that led to superior progress, but the fact that children exposed to this method were taught to segment and blend letters in all positions of a word.

Instruction which involves directing the learner's attention to letter-sounds in all positions of a word, and direct teaching of segmenting and blending skills, always in the presence of print, are both major features of the Nutshell programme materials. The well-thought-out components and procedures of the Nutshell reading programme are strongly supported by these recent research findings, but added to this the programme is not only a programme for beginners but includes comprehensive and well-structured phonics-based instruction to sustain and further accelerate learning as far as the sixth year of primary school. In addition, there continues to be a shortage of reading programmes which link the phonics instruction given with reading materials that permit the direct practice of skills taught. The Macademia Readers are a rare and valuable resource that fulfil this need.

Johnston, R. and Watson, I. (1998). *Accelerating Reading Attainment: The Effectiveness of Synthetic Phonics. Interchange 57.* The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department. Copies can be obtained from the following website: <http://www.hmis.scotoff.gov.uk/riu>

Macmillan, B. (1997). *Why Schoolchildren Can't Read*, London: The Institute of Economic Affairs.

Stuart, M. (1999). Getting ready for reading: early phoneme awareness and phonics teaching improves reading and spelling in inner-city second language learners. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 69, 587-605

Sumbler, K. and Willows, D. (1996). Phonological awareness and alphabetic coding instruction within balanced senior kindergartens. Paper presented as part of the symposium *Systematic Phonics within a balanced Literacy Program*. National Reading Conference. Charleston, SC. December.

Watson, J. (1999). An investigation of the effects of phonics teaching on children's progress in reading and spelling. PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, Scotland.

Old Habits Die Hard

by Geraldine Carter

‘Expenditure on pupils with S.E.N. may be as high as £7.1 billion (out of a total education budget of about £20 billion)’

Research and class-based programmes, developed during the 1990s, have shown that young children using synthetic phonics (a simple, practical, sound-based training that includes all letter sounds taught rapidly, with emphasis on the reading code) is revolutionizing the teaching of reading. Instead of up to 30% of children experiencing reading difficulties at age 7-8, only around 2% - 5% of the most severely ‘dyslexic’ children would require specialist help after the introduction of synthetic phonics in nursery and reception classes.

In spite of overwhelming evidence (U.S., U.K, and New Zealand based) old habits die hard.

Opposition to synthetic phonics, and its implementation into schools comes from:

- a. Proponents of whole word ‘real books’ reading who are implacably opposed to synthetic phonics. They include influential academics such as Professor Henrietta Dombey of Brighton University – adviser to John Stannard/National Literacy Strategy. In sound-bite terms, phonics teaching is considered to be authoritarian – not ‘politically correct’.
- b. Teachers who mix and match (encouraged by the eclectic approach of the National Literacy Strategy) with a desperate belief that if you try everything you must succeed.
- c. Some practitioners of analytic phonics (mainstay of the U.K. dyslexia training institutions over the past 30+ years). Until the development of synthetic phonics, analytic phonics was the only universally recognised, effective way of remediating poor readers. Analytic phonics followers believe that, as the roots of dyslexia are complex, and the written code is difficult, an appropriate programme must reflect these complexities. Analytic phonics takes children with scrupulous thoroughness through a two to four-year programme. It is inordinately expensive, and can be distressing for children who see themselves falling further behind their peers. Nevertheless, it is infinitely better than options a. and b..

Synthetic phonics rapidly teaches almost all children to read (and to become better spellers) within weeks rather than years. It requires no great outlay on materials, is extraordinarily cost effective in terms of staff requirements, and is simple, rewarding and exhilarating to teach. Thousands of special needs teachers could be returned to mainstream teaching if synthetic phonics were to be introduced in the foundation stage continuing into Year 1.

There are four main synthetic phonics programmes:

- i. **Phono-Graphix** developed in Florida by Carmen and Geoffrey McGuinness, introduced to the UK in 1998. *‘The innovative Phono-Graphix method demystifies phonics by throwing out the rules and re-emphasising the nature of the code-sound to symbol. Phono-Graphix emphasises the representation of the sound as the children actually hear it. The progress for language and literacy is outstanding.’* Ofsted.
- ii. **Accelerated Reading and Spelling with Synthetic Phonics** researched and developed by Dr. Joyce E. Watson and Dr. Rhona S. Johnston, School of Psychology, University of St. Andrews, whose impressive and wide-ranging research pilot covering 5 year olds in 16 Clackmannanshire schools has led to *‘staggeringly good results’* (Judith Judd, TES 1999).

- iii. **Best Practice Phonics** developed by Ruth Miskin, former headmistress of Kobi Nazrul School, Tower Hamlets. *'Every healthy child can learn to read – and in a rigorous system of phonics...effectively, phonics keeps children off the SEN register.'* Kobi Nazrul School, with its large Bengali intake, has only 3% of children regarded as having SEN: a neighbouring school with similar intake has 55% of children regarded as having SEN.
- iv. **Jolly Phonics** developed by Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham (see this issue of Reading Reform Foundation newsletter for response by LEA advisers to improved reading test scores). *'We introduced Jolly Phonics in 1996. Instead of having 40% of 6 year olds struggling, by the end of that year, every child was reading. Same teachers, just a change of methodology.'* (New Zealand Listener 4.3.2000)

POSTSCRIPT: I was introduced to the Reading Reform Foundation this year. Their newsletters are essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the political landscape of the reading debate and the labyrinthine struggles to bring the debate on synthetic phonics into the open.

Geraldine Carter, B.A., Freelance Editor. Hornsby Diploma in SpLD

Editor's comment:

*We are also eager to learn more about the **Early Reading Research** being conducted in some Essex schools. Results from previous research concluded that the synthetic phonics teaching of the ERR led to far higher results than in the National Literacy Project schools. (Deavers, R., Soly, 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). Jonathan Soly and his colleagues are now making similar comparisons between ERR schools and National Literacy Strategy schools. We are hoping to have an article describing this in the Reading Reform Foundation newsletter later in the year.*

It is extraordinary that after much correspondence, the DfEE have yet to acknowledge any of the research mentioned by the Reading Reform Foundation. Statistics at Key Stage 2, however, are churned out like 'name, rank and serial number'. What about results at the end of Key Stage 1? Of course we cannot get a true picture of the effect of different methods in the teaching of reading in the early years, because apparently neither Ofsted nor the DfEE are publicly acknowledging the existence and/or effectiveness of synthetic phonics teaching. All literacy results are described under the National Literacy Strategy umbrella. We should also be very concerned that the overview of results at Key Stage 1 is not publicly available – disguising what is actually going on in early years' settings.

We hope to have made it crystal clear in this newsletter that 'which' literacy teaching is undertaken in the early years is vitally important for the possibility of substantially reducing national special educational needs.

The Importance of Joined Handwriting

by Debbie Hepplewhite

I used to think handwriting was only important in that it improved presentation. My theory was that neat handwriting would encourage the child to take a greater sense of pride and satisfaction in his/her writing – leading to the production of more! This theory, I am sure, is not incorrect – but is only part of a much larger picture. I was very interested to read Bonnie Macmillan’s comments about handwriting, because they tie in exactly with my own observations.

The ability to form letters automatically, fluently and correctly is fundamentally important to foster writing skills in the child. Synthetic phonics teaching is extremely effective for teaching children to read and spell. We must ensure that this is balanced with **plenty of practice of correct letter formation**. I believe ‘copy writing’ and ‘emergent writing’ as emphasised in the DfEE *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* are not nearly so helpful as precise and correct letter-writing practice. Too much copying of labels in a child’s own style will create bad habits – all of which must be undone at some stage. I think the correct pencil hold reinforced in the foundation stage is also vital. **By Year 1 bad habits can already be ingrained and very difficult to change.** Say “...*froggy legs on the bottom of the painted part...*” [thumb and forefinger], “...*then sit on the log...*” [middle finger supporting the pencil]. Thick pencils are much more difficult for children to hold comfortably than regular thickness. Try holding a giant joke pencil – it is very awkward!

I cannot recommend highly enough the joined writing style which has ‘leaders’ for all lower case letters. This style is known to be very dyslexia-friendly and is particularly easy to teach to young children. Include with this the looping of tails (I always emphasise “...*straight down and thin loop...*”), so the whole word can be written in one movement. This also helps to establish the automatic hand movement of ‘written’ letter-strings.

For practice, the children start with all the ‘curly c letters’: c a d o g s f qu

When the writing of these letters is thoroughly automatic, I introduce the rest of the alphabet and insist on joined writing from then on. I encourage a ‘diagonal join’ to the top of the shorter letters and half way up the taller letters. This spaces out the letters beautifully. All lower case letters “...*start on the line...*” and all capital letters “...*start from the top and don’t join...*”. When children learn this style, their handwriting is transformed, and they are really encouraged to write copious amounts. Everyone comments on the handwriting of my Year 1s and Year 2s, and the children do indeed take great pride in their work!

c	a	d	o	g	s	f	qu
i	u	r	n	m	y	j	p
l	t	k	h	b		e	
v	w	x		z			

The Jolly Phonics Story Part 2 by Sue Lloyd

The first part of this story was printed in the last newsletter. It described the way the teaching method evolved at Woods Loke Primary School in the 1970's and how this had influenced the reading results. The children were now scoring an average quotient of 110+ on the Young Reading Test, and best of all there were far fewer children below 90.

Naturally we were excited to see the children learning to read and write so much more easily than before. The huge improvement on the standardised test just confirmed what we had seen with our eyes. I really expected that an LEA adviser would notice this enormous improvement and would want to know if we had done anything different in our teaching. When nobody showed interest, I decided to let the advisers know about our new phonic method of teaching, and invited them to come and see for themselves. Again there was no response. This worried and puzzled me. Why were they not interested in something that was so good for the children?

Some time later, having recovered from the disappointment, I decided to try again. In the meantime I had become more aware that the teaching of phonics, not to mention the use of the initial teaching alphabet, was absolutely taboo. The influence of Whole Language and Real Books was well on the way. I was also very aware that children coming into our school from other schools generally had no idea about how the alphabetic code worked and were considerably behind our children, even though they frequently seemed more intelligent. When there was still no response from our adviser, I went to our local MP and explained what was happening. After that, the adviser did sweep in, took a cursory look at the children's books, and departed with what was to become the usual cry, 'You must have very good teachers.' This, of course, made no sense at all. We had all experienced the improvement and knew that we could not have suddenly become these wonderful teachers! It also taught me that the education system was not run on logic but on fashionable trends. The adviser saw her role as promoting the latest ideas – she went through the motions of looking at what we were doing but saw nothing.

Soon after this, I was sent to the Centre for the Teaching of Reading at the University of Reading School of Education for a month's course on 'Extending Reading'. I think they hoped that I would see the error of my ways. Many ideas about developing higher order reading skills in the lectures were very good. This was fine for those children who could read. What I wanted to know was how they dealt with the children who had not even managed to acquire the lower order reading skills. Apart from one teacher, nobody cared about these children. They all disapproved of phonics and dismissed our good results with phrases like 'We all know they can score well on tests but they don't understand the meaning of what they are reading', or 'You are taking the joy of reading away from the children. You put them off books for life' etc. On the few occasions when they seemed to be losing the argument, they just turned their backs on me. This came as a shock. In the end I started to feel that I must be wrong. Perhaps I had been like the soldier marching out of step who was under the misapprehension that he was right and all the others were wrong! On returning to school, I thought about the things I had heard at The Centre for the Teaching of Reading, and looked carefully at the children. The majority of our children easily understood what they were reading and they loved their books: certainly more so than the children from other schools. It was just nonsense and something needed to be done about it.

Many years passed. Nobody from the LEA came near us. Whenever I met anyone connected with education, I told them that it was not necessary to have so many children failing to read and write.

The problems were caused by the lack of systematic, synthetic phonics. One day, at an educational meeting, I met Christopher Jolly. He listened to me, and wanted to find out more.

More about Chris Jolly and Jolly Phonics in the next edition of the RRF Newsletter.

Editor's comment:

I, for one, am both fascinated and appalled by Sue's unfolding story. We need to ascertain exactly what role our LEAs actually fulfil, because many of us have turned to leading figures in an educative way only to be ignored and/or our findings rejected. Advisers and inspectors are not necessarily all wise and all knowing. They should be prepared to learn from others, and modify their views and practices like the rest of us. Surely common sense and conscience should transcend remits and policies? And what about the overwhelming evidence...?

A comparison between the pace of synthetic phonics teaching and the DfEE directives

Synthetic Phonics:	NLS Progression in Phonics:
<p>Synthetic phonics provides the necessary skills that enable the majority to read and write above their chronological age. The 20% of children who have literacy problems still have a good foundation of the basics and just need more time and input.</p>	<p>Children taught by following the NLS Progression in Phonics' strategy will go into Year 1 with a reading and spelling age below their chronological age. The 20% of children who have literacy problems will be virtually starting from the beginning and will be far more likely to need a great deal of remedial help.</p>
Term 1 of a full reception year (age 4 – 5)	
<p>Learn letter sounds: a to z ai, ee, ie, oa, ue, er, oi, ou, or oo, ng, ar, qu, ch, sh and th</p> <p>Blend 100+ regular words using above sounds.</p> <p>Identify sounds in words – make/write 100+ words using the above sounds.</p> <p>Learn 10-20 irregular key words.</p> <p>Start reading books from reading schemes.</p> <p>Result: Children understand the code of English and know how to read and write simple words and a few irregular words.</p>	<p>Listen for sounds : environment, instruments, voice sounds and body percussion, rhythm, rhythm and rhyme, alliteration.</p> <p>Result: Know how to listen for sounds in the environment.</p>

Synthetic phonics	NLS Progression in Phonics
Term 2	
<p>Revise letter sounds, blending and listening for sounds in words. Learn to recognise alternative sounds ay, a-e, ea, igh, y, i-e, ow, o-e, ew, u-e, oy, ir, ur. Blend words with the above sounds. Regularly identify sounds in words. Write independently several sentences by listening for the sounds and writing letters for those sounds. Read to parents, and at school, books from reading schemes. Learn 20 more irregular words. Know the blending technique: If the short vowel does not work try the long one.</p> <p>Result: Read 10-50 small books. Write independently news and simple stories by listening for the sounds – a few tricky words being spelt correctly.</p>	<p>Continue a rhyming string. Hear and say phonemes s/ m/ k/ t/ g/ h/ Know phoneme-grapheme correspondences: s, m, c, t, g, h. Hear and say phonemes in final position. Consolidate previously learned phoneme-grapheme correspondences recognising that some alter in final position, e.g. ss, ck. Know more phoneme-grapheme correspondences: l, n, d, k, sh, ch.</p> <p>Result: Know some of the alphabet letters – phoneme-grapheme. Hear those phoneme-graphemes in initial and final positions in words.</p>
Term 3	
<p>Regularly revise all the letter sounds already taught. Learn to recognise the alternatives au, aw, al. Know the principles of ‘soft c’ and ‘soft g’. Blend regular words with the above sounds. Read 10-30 books at home and at school – fluent readers start choosing their own books, at their level. Understand that for some phonemes there is more than one way of writing them e.g. ai, ay, a-e. The children have to try to choose the correct spelling for these phonemes. Learn 20 more irregular keywords. Write stories/news/topics/science independently. Listen for the sounds in words correctly. Spell the known irregular keywords. Attempt to use the correct alternative spellings.</p> <p>Results: Fluency developing well for reading. Spelling showing marked improvement. Average reading age usually one year ahead of chronological age. Average spelling age usually more than one year ahead.</p>	<p>Hear and say phonemes in medial position: a/ e/ i/ o/ u/ Know more phoneme-grapheme correspondences (a, e, i, o, u, and f, qu, b, r, j, p, th, ng). Segment to spell cvc words. Blend to read cvc words.</p> <p>Results: The children hardly understand the code of reading – blending only introduced at the end of the year (step 4). A few children will know some words by sight. Most of the single letter and some digraph phoneme-grapheme correspondences will be known. The children will be able to use rhyme and segment cvc words. Very few will know how to read and write unknown words, especially if they are longer than cvc. The majority will not be reading books.</p>

In Conclusion

The teaching profession complains about all the recent changes officially required and the subsequent burden of increased (unnecessary) paperwork, but one cannot deny a sense of excitement from the input of new ideas, resources and training opportunities. The time is here for our profession to be truly thoughtful and creative, taking the very best out of the many initiatives – whilst rejecting those elements that we simply have not found to be the most suitable or effective in our settings. This ‘upwards evaluation’ is long overdue. At the chalk face, we are subject to it constantly. Are those in authority, who shape our methods and curriculum, equally accountable? They are not.

We have a bizarre and tragic situation where the DfEE has foisted upon us directives for the early years that are heavily flawed – proof of which we have in abundance. The *National Literacy Strategy* and *Progression in Phonics* were hastily created. Advice from too many sources resulted in compromised recommendations, and in a lack of clear guidance on the best way to teach early literacy. Phonics is now recognised as the essential ingredient for the goal of raising literacy standards, and yet all the leading phonics experts’ protestations that the NLS is flawed are being ignored. The DfEE will not respond to our voiced concern supported by the research evidence. Ofsted continues to report on literacy in synthetic phonics settings as if all results were a product of the *National Literacy Strategy* – misleading both our profession and the general public. Training opportunities are totally dominated by the DfEE directives. Standards, far from being ‘national’, continue to vary widely from one setting to the next. Ignorance of what can easily be achieved still abounds.

What an irony that teachers sometimes feel that they cannot follow all the guidance in such programmes as *Jolly Phonics* or *Best Practice Phonics* because they have to incorporate the conflicting recommendations of the NLS *Progression in Phonics*. Our comparison chart (p.20-21) clearly demonstrates that there is a vast difference in the potential of each approach. The new ‘politically correct’ emphasis on ‘learning through play’ as advised in the DfEE *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* is also resulting in missed opportunities for the best start in early literacy. Margaret Hodge’s statement on the training video that “...*It is not about them learning to read and write too early...*” is misleading, contentious, thoughtless and damaging.

When something is so simple as teaching young children to read by teaching them the sounds quickly, and teaching them to sound out and blend throughout the word from the outset (initial, medial, final sound), why go ‘round the houses’? The difference in results between the expectations of synthetic phonics teaching and *Progression in Phonics*’ teaching is profound, and this issue must not continue to be swept under the carpet by the authorities at both LEA and DfEE level. In the U.S.A., research that backs this up led the National Reading Panel to conclude that:

- ‘Teaching PA with letters helps students acquire PA more effectively than teaching PA without letters.’ [PA stands for Phonemic Awareness] (*Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* p.2-41)

Instead of spending all the time trying to develop phonemic awareness without letters using the activities in the *Progression in Phonics* Step 1, we should be teaching synthetic phonics. The Canadian researcher, Dale Willows, found that the best gains were made when the children had synthetic phonics [*Jolly Phonics*] **in the nursery and reception class...**and the children loved it.

Another revealing conclusion reached by The National Reading Panel was:

- *To be able to make use of letter-sound information, children need phonemic awareness. That is, they need to be able to blend sounds together to decode words, and they need to break spoken words into their constituent sounds to write words. Programs that focus too much on the teaching of letter-sound relations and not enough on putting them to use are unlikely to be very effective. In implementing systematic phonics instruction, educators must keep the end in mind and ensure that children understand the purpose of learning letter-sounds and are able to apply their skills in their daily reading and writing activities. (p.2-135)*

Until we are given evidence that the children being taught strictly to the *National Literacy Strategy* and *Progression in Phonics* achieve higher results than those children taught with synthetic phonics, teachers and foundation stage practitioners should not be drawn into deviating from the principles of systematic synthetic phonics teaching. The new NLS material *Developing Early Writing* clearly shows settings where children are taught their letters sounds from using *Jolly Phonics* mnemonics (although there is blatantly no acknowledgement of this), but then the teachers continue to follow the slower and flawed advice of *Progression in Phonics* – to which there is constant reference. **We would argue that the National Literacy Strategy is keeping reading and writing standards in the early years below their true potential.** The DfEE is in an ideal position for self-promotion of its methods and materials, with no corresponding accountability. This cannot be right.



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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.

Feedback

Please describe any interest you have in synthetic phonics. What are your experiences? Have you any reading and spelling results? Have you any questions? Can you write something to contribute to our newsletter? Have you found the RRF newsletter/s helpful?

The Reading Reform Foundation is calling for:

- Ofsted to report openly and accurately on synthetic phonics teaching in early years' settings
- replacement of the expensive and inappropriate end of Key Stage 1 English tests by simple and inexpensive standardised tests at the end of Reception, Year 1 and Year 2
- scientific and open comparisons between the effectiveness of synthetic phonics teaching and NLS teaching in the early years
- the dissemination of literacy teaching information by the DfEE and the LEAs regarding the results of reputable scientific assessment
- synthetic phonics training provided, or facilitated, by the DfEE and the LEAs in addition to current NLS directives
- amendment of the National Literacy Strategy in line with the most effective literacy teaching methods in the early years (synthetic phonics)
- examination of literacy teaching methods promoted in the Teacher Training Establishments
- transparent and consistent policies on the promotion/endorsement of commercial materials from Ofsted, the DfEE and LEAs



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