

## All-through-the-word phonics

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## Dear Readers,

Since newsletter no. 47 reached 25,000 schools and the Education Directors and leading Literacy Advisers, we have had a huge increase of subscriptions and visits to the RRF website - including a very large number of downloads of the previous issues of our newsletters. We have learnt of various phonics research projects such as the *Multi-sensory Teaching System (MTS)*, the Oxford based 'Code Breakers' Hamilton Project and Dundee City Council's *READ* project to name but a few. Trying to squeeze in yet ever more interesting and informative material in the hard copy of the newsletter is proving to be an impossible task and I encourage readers to keep checking our website where additional items are posted. We have recently added a messageboard facility which is as yet underused and I do encourage people to join us in conversation.

Significant research from Tasmania is featured in this issue. Byron Harrison's paper provides us with further insight as to how apparent whole language reading ability 'hits a brick wall' within a few years.

Scotland races ahead of England in the promotion of evidence-based literacy teaching. In America, President Bush has instigated the *Reading First* initiative whereby schools must demonstrate that they use evidence-based reading programmes to qualify for federal funding. In contrast to our Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Office For Standards in Education (Ofsted), America understands the need for early reading books which match the existing knowledge and skills of the children, and the need for scientific testing to inform our teaching practices.

As there is clearly some confusion about what is involved in synthetic phonics teaching, the RRF suggests the following two catch phrases to clarify understanding:

**All-through-the-word phonics** (from the outset for both synthesising and analysing)

**Blending for reading** (the main decoding strategy)

Far too much emphasis and time is devoted to the initial letter of words in the National Literacy Strategy. Children are actually both helped by, and capable of, sounding out and blending all-through-the-word for reading, and hearing the sounds all-through-the-word for spelling from the earliest stage. This ensures that the purpose of sound/symbol relationships is soon understood by the children as they put these to use without unnecessary delay.

I hope you enjoy and find some value in newsletter no. 48 and many thanks to those who have contributed to the contents.

Debbie Hepplewhite

# Readers' Letters

Dear Debbie,

I am writing to you now as I have just come back from the first of three training days for Early Literacy Support and thought you might be interested to know what I found out. I attended with our other Year 1 class teacher and a teaching assistant.

Everything was going well until they showed a video about guided reading. I could not believe what I was seeing! The video was of a male teacher teaching a small group. He started by showing the children some balls of coloured play dough and asking them what colour they were. I think his intention might have been to lead on to teaching them to read colour words but he did not show any words at this stage. He then showed them a book about go-karts and straight away turned to one of the pages, folding back the text so that the children could only see the picture. He asked the children what it was and they said it was a car. The teacher told them it was a go-kart (without explaining what it was) and asked them about the colour. This was repeated with several pages of the book – each time, the text was concealed. Finally, he gave the children their own copy of the book and showed them the text which said 'Here comes the white/green/orange/purple go-kart' and pointed to the words 'Here comes' telling them what they said but giving no reference to sounding out the words. He asked them what they should do if they could not read the colour word and they did not know. He told them to look at the picture and again prompted them to tell him how they should use the picture to help. Eventually he told them to look at the colour of the go-kart. He then told them to read the books individually and he helped them in turn.

Before we were shown the video, I thought that we were going to be shown an example of how to teach guided reading. When the video clip had finished, I suddenly thought the course leader was actually giving us an illustration of how not to teach guided reading! My next thought was that it was an old video from the seventies when teachers taught using 'Look and Say'. However, the course leader carried on talking about the 'searchlight approach' to teaching reading. I was amazed and I asked her what she thought the teacher in the video was actually trying to teach the children because it certainly did not look like a reading lesson. She disagreed with me and I told her that I thought the main thing that the children were learning was how to guess. She then said that, of course, the children were probably also being taught phonics in a separate session and that the reading session was a good way of introducing guided reading. I said that they needed to learn phonic skills first and, again, she disagreed. On reflection, I think that the only thing the children learned was colour recognition and they certainly were not learning reading skills.

Later the course leader came up to me and said that we could decide our own teaching programme and I again said that the phonic skills came first and that I thought the government was supposed to have moved away from the 'Look and Say' approach. She said that they were promoting a balanced approach. I told her that I had always used the phonics first approach and it was very successful. I said that frequently, when children joined us from other schools and they had been 'taught' through 'Look and Say', we had to take them back to learning phonic skills as they could not actually read. She said that we each had our own views (and she was obviously not prepared to change hers). I said that I was surprised that our Advisory Teachers were taking this approach.

As you can imagine, I was incensed. However, this is not the first time that I have come across this blinkered view from the Advisory Service. This only goes to reinforce my view that many teachers are teaching two separate things – the phonics system on one hand, and how to read as a separate system, based on 'Look and Say' and using unsuitable reading schemes.

I look forward to hearing your views on this video clip which was quite an eye-opener to me. I'm glad that I had my say at the meeting, but the course leader made me feel as though I was being an undermining revolutionary! My main concern on seeing the video was that the teaching assistants present on the course would think that 'Look and Say' was a good way of teaching children. After I had made my comment, no other teachers (apart from the one in my school who agreed with me wholeheartedly) said anything to me about their views and I wondered whether they agreed with the course leader rather than me (am I a lone voice in the wilderness?)

Name and address supplied

*Editor's comment: This is the same Early Literacy Support video that Jennifer Chew evaluated in newsletter no. 47 (page 12, November 2001). You are not a lone voice in the wilderness and your reaction was identical to mine on the training day I attended, and to many other teachers and researchers with good literacy credentials. See page 17 for Baroness Ashton's reply to Lord Prior's written question.*

Dear Debbie,

I have just received my first copy of the Reading Reform Foundation newsletter and was interested to read so many articles which concur with my beliefs about the teaching and learning of reading and writing. I am a primary school teacher, teaching 4 – 6 year olds and I firmly believe in the importance of phonics as a tool for learning to read and write. It seems to me to be the only logical system and I fail to understand how teachers can ever have thought there was a better way!

I could write at length about my frustrations in persuading others of the importance of teaching phonics. Our school's LEA English Adviser practically told me I was teaching incorrectly by introducing digraphs to Reception children. How else can children write down the sounds they need for writing if you don't give them the skills to do it?

There are two points about the current teaching of reading that particularly concern me:

Firstly, the National Literacy Strategy states that during the Foundation Stage, children should learn the letter names as well as their sounds. Letter names are unnecessary while children are learning to read and write. They cannot be blended for reading and if children learn the sounds and names, they become confused as they have to choose which to use when they are reading and writing. Letter names can be introduced gradually at the end of Reception year, by which time most children should be confidently reading and writing using letter sounds.

The second point is one of which the DfES does not appear to be aware. There are two things currently taking place in some early years classes. Children are being taught phonics on the one hand in order to comply with the National Literacy Strategy, and then being taught through reading schemes that do not encourage the use of phonics. On the contrary, they require the practice of Look and Say. You only have to look at the early books in the majority of schemes to see that this is the case. The only reading scheme I have found that uses phonics systematically is the Soundstart scheme, published by Nelson Thornes. This scheme was mentioned in the Resources section of your newsletter (no. 47). It is an excellent scheme but I do not think that many schools know about it. We have frequently found that when children join our school from other schools, they are not able to read the books that the previous school said they could and they are unable to apply phonic skills to reading. This has serious implications for their progress and we often find that we have to take them back to square one – the learning of letter sounds.

I gather from most of the articles in your publication that, like me, you and some of your contributors have become cynical about persuading others of the importance of the common sense approach. Sometimes I think it is like knocking your head against a brick wall. However, I take heart in the fact that we no longer have 'dyslexic' children in our school (how much dyslexia is actually the result of poor teaching?) and the number of special needs children who have poor reading skills is also low. Nearly all the children I have taught have moved on to their next class with a reading age 18 months ahead of their chronological age, so at least I have played my part in helping them along their way!

Name and address supplied.

*Editor's comment: I, and others, concur with everything you say. You will be interested to know that behind the scenes the RRF has been corresponding with the DfES and Ofsted about the issue of appropriate reading books for beginner and struggling readers. Jennifer Chew points to research in this newsletter about the advisability of using decodable reading books at the level of the knowledge and skills of the children (see page 15). We have yet to convince those in authority that Look and Say books develop damaging reading habits in children. We have pointed out that the children have to resort to guesswork to simply 'get through' the books. But then the NLS advises a range of guessing reading strategies despite the conclusions of research and the advice of many experts in the field of teaching reading. Many teachers are simply unaware that blending is the best way to teach reading and they rely entirely on the Reading Searchlight Strategies and Look and Say. They think that phonics is for spelling/writing purposes.*

New Decodable Reading Books:

*Superphonics* by Ruth Miskin published by Hodder and Stoughton

*Jolly Phonics Read and See* books and *Jolly Readers* by Jolly Learning Ltd

(And don't forget *Soundstart* by Nelson Thornes as mentioned in previous newsletter)

**Publishers please note- we would appreciate more decodable reading books on the market.**

Dear Editor,

I can see why Felicity Craig (*Newsletter 47*) has reservations about the term ‘synthetic phonics’. It certainly has drawbacks, not least the possible connotations of artificiality and the misleading implication that no attention is paid to phonemic analysis. ‘All-through-the-word phonics’ might be a better term, covering the use of grapheme-phoneme knowledge from beginning to end of a word in both reading and spelling. But if we dropped the *term* ‘synthetic phonics’, we would still need to stress the *concept*: that of reading words by producing phonemes for all graphemes and building up a pronunciation without knowing that pronunciation in advance. Even proficient readers consciously do this when they encounter unfamiliar words, and as beginners are in a position where virtually every printed word they encounter is unfamiliar, it seems an appropriate skill to teach right at the very beginning.

If the whole spoken word is made available *before* the letter-sound mapping takes place rather than being the end-product of the mapping, then the approach can be regarded as more analytic: the word is pronounced (usually by the teacher but sometimes by the children if they recognise it at sight), and then analysed into smaller units of sound which are mapped on to the graphemes. The National Literacy Strategy materials provide many instances of teachers supplying the spoken form of a printed word before getting the children to think about the phonemes in it (usually just initial or initial and final phonemes) and their relationship to the letters.

Felicity Craig, too, envisages the teacher supplying the spoken form of a written word *before* letter-sound mapping takes place. In a paper entitled ‘Words made of shapes and words made of sounds: the parallel forms of language’ which she submitted to a phonics seminar organised by OFSTED in 1999, she wrote, of sounding out, that ‘We can show a child how to do this by telling him the whole spoken word first’ (p. 9 - underlining original). Her ‘apple’ example (*Newsletter 47*, p. 20) makes the same point. Her mapping is more thorough than that of the NLS in covering *all* letters and sounds in a word, though her belief in including words with complex letter-sound mappings from the start means that the mapping is not always strictly left-to-right: e.g. she writes that ‘For some words, however – e.g. “thought” – it is more helpful to match the beginnings and ends first, and then the bits left over, in the middle, *have* to match with each other’ (*Newsletter 47*, p. 20). That’s fine if the main thrust of phonics instruction is to help children to match the letters on the page with pronunciations which someone else supplies, but it’s not fine if the main thrust is to teach children to *work out* pronunciations from spellings and spellings (at least simple ones) from pronunciations. If this kind of working out is a priority, letter-sound correspondences must be kept simple at first: the introduction of ‘ough’ words must be delayed because they do not lend themselves to simple left-to-right mapping.

All approaches sacrifice *something* in the early stages, because beginners cannot take in everything at once. If one wants to get beginners to do a lot of working out in reading and spelling, one sacrifices storybooks and natural language for a short time. If storybooks and natural language are a priority, one may sacrifice rigorous all-through-the-word left-to-right sounding out and blending. Only test results will tell us which way of proceeding is the most effective.

Jennifer Chew

See RRF website for further articles by Felicity Craig – Ed.

## **Under-publicised approaches to dyslexia**

by Helena Michaels

Reading a recent issue of the newsletter, I was interested to see how the phonics approach has been ignored in recent years in teaching reading. This pattern of ignoring recent research is all too common in the world of education, if I can say so as one who has recently been “on the receiving end” of full time study. My special interest is dyslexia and many dyslexic children are missing out due to other research developments being similarly ignored.

Here is a brief look at two little-understood methods, which can help dyslexic people. These approaches support different areas, all needed for the complex process of reading. Some people will be helped dramatically, others more subtly, depending on which areas needed supporting in the first place. An open mind is needed to give each child the option of exploring what may help.

## **Light Sensitivity Syndrome, also known as Irlen Syndrome**

This area of research is perhaps the most misunderstood in the dyslexic field. Many people believe that a claim has been made that tinted lenses which cut out certain light frequencies “cure” dyslexia. This claim was never made, at least not by the key researcher. Helen Irlen identified a condition which is separate from dyslexia, although up to 50% of dyslexics also have it. Irlen syndrome distorts vision when the person reads off bright white paper. Coloured overlays and coloured lenses allow the person to read in comfort. Many children miss out on this approach because it has been so discredited by not being a cure for a condition it never claimed to cure.

Similar disillusionment with the theory can occur if an ordinary sheet of coloured plastic is used. Frequently it is taken as a reasonable indicator to see if a child would be helped by colour. This often gives a false result as many such filters are very reflective giving rise to further distortions. A matt filter is needed or adjustments to the background colour of a computer for typed study.

## **Behavioural Optometry**

Another method focusing on visual difficulty is Behavioural Optometry. The theory is that the brain and eyes are healthy but simply have not developed. Behavioural optometry believes this can be remedied with an eye exercise programme. A series of exercises is followed daily for six months to a year. Signs that Behavioural Optometry might be needed are dyslexia, poor co-ordination, frequent rubbing of eyes, daily headaches, getting rapidly tired at school and frequent days when exhausted after school.

Key skills which it can strengthen include “Tracking” or following objects smoothly and accurately such as when catching a beanbag or reading along a line. The field of vision can also be extended if it is deficient so the area, over which vision is possible, can grow. This includes being able to read from line to line without losing the place on the page. One boy, in his last year of primary school, recently discovered through Behavioural Optometry that his field of vision was very deficient. At a reading distance of twenty-three centimetres he could only see a circumference the size of a two pence coin. Amazingly he had seen two optometrists before starting school and had had the usual NHS eye tests. This story is all too common. Now, however, the boy’s visual field tests as normal and he is enjoying sport. Though still dyspraxic, he does not now have to contend with badly affected vision as well.

Despite these remarkable results, at least in some cases, Behavioural Optometry is not available on the NHS. Privately it can cost £50 an hour and a weekly session with the optometrist is recommended. Another difficulty with this area is the myth that adults cannot be treated. In cases I have seen, they can and do benefit. Interestingly, many adults have behavioural optometry to improve sports performance, often following the same exercises as those used for dyslexia, yet the efficiency of these programmes is not denied.

As with all approaches to dyslexia I, like most people, am wary of “quick fix.” The above methods will not work for everyone and more research needs to be done. Several methods often need to be used in conjunction with each other. However I feel sad that educational scepticism and arrogantly set ideas can preclude possible help for so many. Dyslexia is after all a condition which, generally, the educator does not personally have and an attitude of “I do not have it so it can not be a problem” is very common. Everyone, especially those labelled “learning disabled” have different weaknesses which affect their reading and which need supporting, be they auditory or visual. An open mind is

needed to consider every option, otherwise many children will face the misery of easily avoidable barriers to learning.

### Contacts

British Association of Behavioural Optometry, 72 High Street, Billericay, Essex.  
www.eyezone.co.uk/babo

### Books

Helen Irlen, "Reading by the Colours."

Helena Michaels is a freelance journalist. She is currently setting up a 'pen pal' scheme for dyslexic and dyspraxic children. The concept is that the children can chat about anything and everything by letter tape or email, including the highs and lows of having specific learning difficulties.

## **Do we have a literacy crisis?**

by Byron Harrison

In Australia this question has been almost impossible to answer because we have no independent national inspectorate. Whole Language, 'Top-Down' philosophy thereby controls both the training of teachers and the testing of literacy outcomes that result from that training.

Tests are designed to fit within Top-Down philosophic limitations and are largely limited to higher order, context-driven processing such as cloze procedures and comprehension.

We present evidence showing that such tests do not reveal subskill deficits such as:

- knowledge of sounds,
- confusions between names and sounds,
- capacity to blend sounds into syllables,
- capacity to read 1,2 and 3 syllabic words,
- capacity to proof read,
- confusions between the shapes and sounds of the letters b, d, p etc.

### Survey population.

The raw data in this paper was therefore drawn from an independent source, an optometric practice conducting literacy research. This paper is part of a larger study of 3000 consecutive children. The children were mainly resident in or around Hobart, the beautiful capital of Tasmania in Australia.

Ten years ago, when Whole Language reigned supreme, Tasmania claimed to be at the leading edge of Australian education. Since that time there has been a gradual retreat from an overt anti-phonics sentiment to the current 'but-we-teach-everything' policy position.

However since California's 1998 dismissal of Whole Language as 'unscientific', Tasmania has seen some introduction of Synthetic Phonics but its introduction is voluntary and its application piecemeal. We still employ teachers who believe phonics is a four-letter word, many infant teachers

have not received additional phonic training and the bureaucrats and teacher training institutions, responsible for more than 20 years of Top-Down teaching, are still drawing salary and still training teachers.

The study.

The full 3000 child study (in preparation) will report on 25 different aspects of literacy ranging from the child’s capacity to simply point to matching letters, to examining a child’s responses when reading at speed, through to a child’s capacity to detect when a word’s spelling looks correct.

This interim paper only reports on five of those twenty-five aspects, those which involve the children’s capacity to read phonetically-regular 1,2 and 3 syllabic words.

Protocol

The practice sees a disproportionate number of struggling children. This paper therefore confines itself to the 487 children who had been lead to believe that they were ‘average’ readers.

The children were first asked to categorise themselves as:

1. ‘average’ readers or
2. ‘below average’ readers or
3. ‘above average’ readers.

That self-assessment was then independently confirmed or denied by their parents acting on the basis of teacher interviews, school reports and often by parental observation in the classroom. In the few cases where there was disagreement the data was excluded from the study.

- Selected words appeared on the computer screen.
- The child was given unlimited time to read the words.
- The words appeared without pictures or context.
- If the child misread a word, a second and similarly structured word was immediately displayed to confirm the error pattern.
- The response was only recorded as an error if both words were misread.

**Results** (%)

UNLIMITED TIME ALLOWED: (only multiple errors recorded)					
Age	Confuses name/snd	Misreads 1 syllable	Misreads 2 syllables	Misreads 3 syllables	Inaccurate Guesses
6	34	93	65	100	76
7	21	75	54	100	75
8	27	59	25	91	66
9	30	39	6	87	66
10	36	21	13	79	49
11	29	10	6	71	38
12	31	12	10	72	44

Column 1: Confusions between letter names and sounds.

The three letters c, g and y have multiple sounds. This table therefore only reports on the percentage of children who made four or more errors. If a child confused the name and sound of a vowel, they



were told ‘Yes that is the name but what sound does it make?’ This data only records children, who despite that prompting, clearly had no knowledge of short vowel sounds.

The fact that 34% of 6 year olds confuse letter names and sounds is understandable and perhaps inevitable in a situation where infant schools fail to advise preschool parents and teachers to teach sounds not names. What is of more concern is the finding that at the age of 9, after three years of compulsory education, 30% of children still hadn’t mastered letter sounds, arguably the most basic phonic skill.

Given that children’s reading habits, both good and bad, have usually been habituated by the age of 9, it is alarming but not surprising to find evidence of confusions between names and sounds in 31% of children entering high school.

#### Column 2: Misreads 1 syllabic words.

The four most common causes of misreading 3 letter words were:

1. guessing errors (paying attention to some letters but misguessing others. e.g. ‘pet’ misread as ‘pot’). At the age of nine, 66% of all errors were due to misguessing<sup>1</sup>.
2. confusions between the names and sounds of vowels (e.g. ‘net’ misread as ‘neat’)
3. b,d,p confusions (e.g. ‘big’ misread as ‘dig’).
4. Word reversals (e.g. ‘was’ misread as ‘saw’).

Our data indicates that whilst ‘was/saw’ word reversals usually disappear by the age of 10, the ‘big/dig’ letter reversals and the ‘net/neat’ name/sound confusions often persist throughout primary school undermining both self-confidence and phonic skills. The ‘pet/pot’ guessing errors persist longer still.

#### Column 3: Misreads 2 syllabic words. (e.g. ‘picnic’ misread as ‘picture’)

The fact that readers make fewer errors on two syllabic words than when reading either one or three syllabic words may seem to be an odd finding. In fact it is precisely what we predicted<sup>2</sup> should happen whenever whole word guessing becomes the dominant mode of word attack.

#### Column 3: misreads 3 syllabic words. (e.g. ‘cormorant’ misread as ‘computer’)

Our team explained, in papers and lectures as far back as 1988, why whole-word guessing has an upper limit of about 7 letter words. We actually predicted that about 75% of children entering high school from a primary school with a whole word emphasis should in theory have difficulty with long particularly unfamiliar three and four syllabic words. Our finding reported here that 72% of ‘average’ readers experienced these difficulties merely confirms those predictions. The figures for poor readers are of course even worse. The word length limitation is even observed in some readers who believed they were ‘above average’ readers.

#### Contrast with official figures.

Last year the Australian public was reassured that ‘only’ about 19% of grade 3 (age 9) children failed to meet the national standards. Such a finding is patently incompatible with the above data which shows that 39% of average nine year olds misread 3 letter words, 6% misread 2 syllabic words and 87% were unable to read longer words.

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<sup>1</sup> Whole Language philosophy asserts that such habits should disappear but VAS Theory (see later) predicts that once guessing habits are established, they should tend to persist. The data supports VAS Theory for we find that at the age of twelve, 44% of errors were still due to misguessing. (see column 5).

<sup>2</sup> The Hole In Whole Language: Harrison, Zollner and Magill. Aust. J. Rem. Ed. Vol.27. No. 5 1996

We do not believe that these Australian results are unusual; indeed these are the same error patterns that we observed during our lecture tours in the UK and New Zealand. By testing within context, these underlying subskill problems go undetected and official figures thereby overestimate the skill levels of children.

We conclude that:

- a) basic phonic skills are still not being effectively taught in infant grades;
- b) if good phonic skills are not established in the infant schools, the resultant guess-induced error patterns often persist right into high school;
- c) this population is unlikely to receive scarce remedial resources because they are ‘average’ readers.

All of these outcomes and more were predicted by Visual Attention Span (VAS) Theory back in 1988. Teachers wishing to access the diagnostic methods are referred to our team’s website [www.theharrisonstest.com](http://www.theharrisonstest.com)

### VAS Theory

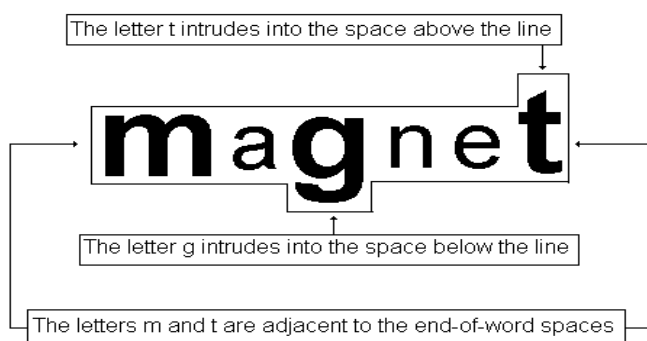
A child learning to read using Synthetic Phonics is learning to pay attention to every letter, to process letters in a left-to-right direction and to connect each letter to its sound.

The whole word processor however is learning to select those letters that attract most attention. The infant then tries to make a match with a word that they know. There is no necessary left-to-right processing going on; they are learning to process words like pictures. It is fast, inherently inaccurate and weak in sequencing.

The letters that attract most attention are called High Visibility Letters and they are:

- the two end letters
- any letters with limbs intruding into the space above and below the word.

Consider the word ‘magnet’ as an example:



The word ‘magnet’ therefore has three High Visibility Letters, **m\_g\_t**, which attract visual attention. If the word-guessing child can simultaneously hold all three of these high visibility letters in memory, then **m\_g\_t** becomes the basis of their guess.

Unfortunately that visual pattern fits more than one word (e.g. maggot, midget, magnet etc) which is why whole word processing is inherently inaccurate.

But some infants have not developed the capacity to hold all three High Visibility Letters in working memory. Their guess may therefore be based on only two of the three letters m\_\_\_\_t and there are now over forty words that fit.

There is thus an intimate relationship between the number of letters that a child can hold in working memory and their capacity to accurately word-guess. The number of letters that a child can hold in memory is called their Visual Attention Span level (hereafter abbreviated to VAS). Teachers can determine a child's VAS level (and thereby their capacity to word-guess) in a few seconds simply by flashing symbols<sup>3</sup> on screen and asking the infant what they saw.

VAS level 3 appears to be the minimum level of VAS consistent with some success in whole word guessing. Teachers should be horrified to learn that our current study of over 3000 children demonstrates that, at the age of 7 years 7 months, 50% of infants had still not developed this level of VAS and were therefore deemed inappropriate candidates for the whole word guessing and predictive cueing strategies taught in their schools.

The problem is not limited to children with low VAS memory:

#### The high VAS child

The high VAS child develops visual memory very early. They may have developed the level 3 VAS memory, the level necessary for whole word guessing, even before they can read. Guessing therefore comes easy and early. Such children are often held up as proof that whole word processing works. A very different picture emerges if the progress of these children is followed in subsequent years.

Their high VAS level leads to initial success both in recognising words and in predicting from context. The child therefore acquires a fast word-guessing strategy. They therefore have little need to learn a slower phonic approach and thereby become guess-dependent.

In our lectures we have called these high VAS children/low phonic children, the 'Brick Wall Kids' because their initial success due to guessing with a high VAS hits a brick wall and begins to fail about the age of nine or ten. The 'brick wall' is caused by the fact the each year the words are getting longer and guessing has an upper limit of about 7 letter words.

As a rule of thumb, if you add 2 to a child's VAS level, you can determine the word length that may be guessable.<sup>4</sup> A child with a VAS level of 3 therefore tends to struggle with words longer than five letters (VAS 3 + 2).

The problem is that even adults seldom exceed level 5 VAS. VAS Theory therefore predicts that guessing -dependence should lead to difficulties with words longer than VAS 5 + 2 = 7 letter words.

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<sup>3</sup> We use carefully selected and sequenced numbers to ensure that the child is processing every number individually. We record how many of the flashed numbers the child can recall. Numbers enable us to start testing VAS at a very early age, as soon as the child can match symbol to word.

<sup>4</sup> It varies a little because some words have a unique shape and are therefore easier to guess. In other cases the context cues may be so strong that guessing becomes easy. The low VAS children often cannot use context cues because there are simply too many unreadable words in sentences to develop any meaning.

In 1988 we put our reputations on the line and predicted that if children were encouraged to word-guess in infant grades, about 75% of them, on entering high school, should display difficulties in reading unfamiliar, phonetically regular words such as 'Eromanga' or 'Consonant'. Eight years later we were saddened to find our predictions confirmed.

Phonics and whole word guessing strategies should therefore be viewed as competitive rather than cooperative strategies at the 'learning to read' stage of development. If teachers attempt to teach both strategies, they should expect to find that many children will choose the faster, inaccurate, unsequenced, context-dependent, whole word guessing alternative. This is one reason why massive phonic deficits are showing up in schools which protest that they do teach phonics. The other reason for such phonic failure of course is that these schools are usually teaching Analytic Phonics rather than Synthetic Phonics.

Consider the graph below:

The left hand scale denotes the VAS level, the bottom scale the age.

The top curved line shows the typical development of VAS in an average reader.

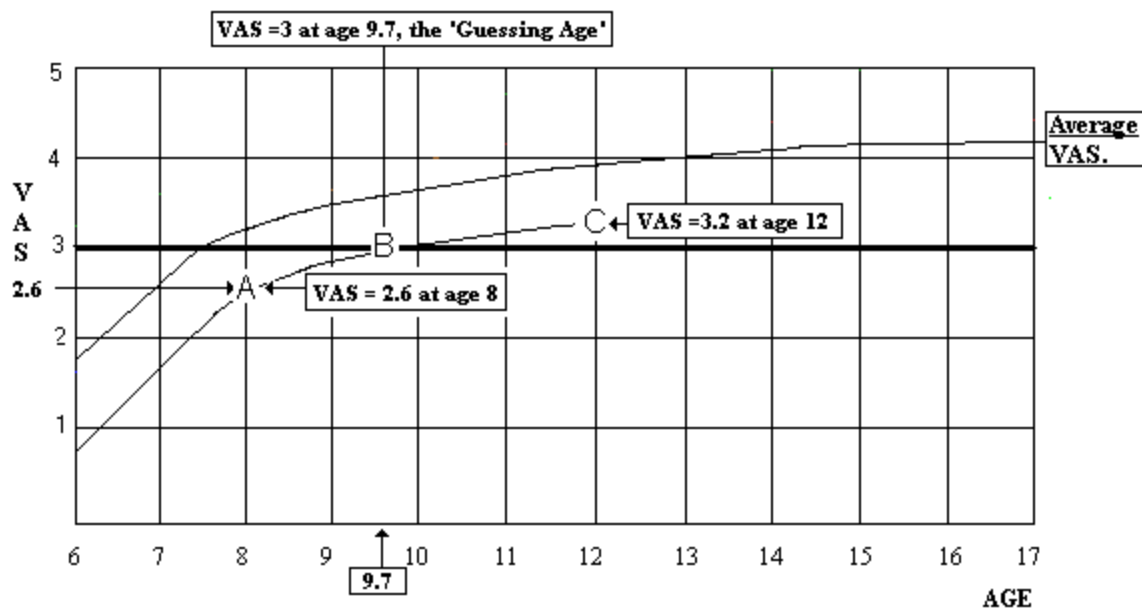
The heavier horizontal line is level 3 VAS, the minimum level necessary for whole word processing.

### Case histories.

Consider the case of John, an 8 year old with a low VAS level of 2.6

There are 3 steps to develop John's VAS graph:

1. draw a vertical line upwards from John's age (8) on the bottom line and
2. draw a horizontal line starting from John's VAS level (2.6) on the left hand side. The point where those two lines intersect is John's current VAS level. It is marked 'A'.
3. draw a line passing through 'A' and parallel with the 'Average VAS' development line'. (This is the A-B-C line)



### What does the chart tell you?

The first thing that you look for is the Guessing Age, the age when VAS level 3 is reached (marked 'B' on the graph). In John's case we can see that he won't reach this age until he is 9 years 7 months.

Immediately the alarm bells should sound because that data indicates that if John has been encouraged to rely on whole word guessing and predictive cueing between the age of 6 and his current age of 8, then he will almost certainly have failed.

You should pray that John knows how to blend sounds and syllables together. If John does NOT have control over his phonic skills then this graph tells you that:

1. John has to be a non-reader, is 'at-risk' and needs urgent remedial attention.
2. He probably has developed a poor attitude towards learning as a result of having experiencing two years of failure.
3. His stock of sight words should be low.
4. Proof reading and spelling<sup>5</sup> should be poor.

You know all this without asking the child to even read a page!

### Case history No. 2

Let us consider another case. (This is in fact John again but in this example you are meeting him for the first time at the age of twelve).

John is just starting high school and you are his new teacher. It has taken you less than 2 minutes to measure his VAS level and his capacity to blend sounds into syllables. You find that he has a VAS level of 3.2. You also find that he is not confident in blending sounds and syllables together mainly because he has confusions between letter names and letter sounds.

You carry out the same 3 steps of

1. draw a vertical line upwards from John's age (12) on the bottom line and
2. draw a horizontal line starting from John's VAS level (3.2) on the left hand side. The point where those two lines intersect is John's current VAS level. It is marked 'C'.
3. draw a line passing through 'C' and parallel with the 'Average VAS' development line'.

### What does the graph now tell you?

It tells you that this child did not reach level 3 VAS until the age of 9 years 7 months.

The fact that he still has confusions between names and sounds at the age of 12, tells you that his phonic skills have never been reliable.

Combining those two bits of information tells you that he must have been a non-reader until the age of 9 years 7 months:

- a) because his phonics were undermined by the name/sound confusions and
- b) because his low VAS level prevented him from using whole word processing.

The predictions would not stop there:

you would expect attitudinal changes to have developed during those 6 years of failure; that damage may never be undone;

he may have developed strategies of overusing context, of relying on pictures, of making random guesses and none of these will have made him a good reader;

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<sup>5</sup> If John misspells 'laid' as 'laed', the misspelled word 'laed' will look perfectly OK (because when John learned to pay attention to the end letters l\_\_d, he will have developed inattention to mid-word letters and their sequence).

those bad habits may have made him resistant to remediation and his low self-esteem may have led him to form associations with other struggling children, adopting their poor attitudes towards authority, slovenly speech and dress code (we all need friends).

You therefore shouldn't be surprised if this child exhibited behavioural problems at home and/or in school.

The two lessons arising from this are:

1. that the low VAS would have identified this child as being at risk in less than a minute as early as age 6 and
2. had Synthetic Phonics been introduced from the start, the low VAS would have been relatively unimportant because a low VAS handicaps guessing skills more than phonic skills (although sight words and proof reading may have needed some extra work).

#### Finale:

- The time has come for teachers to reclaim their profession from those who for almost four decades substituted dogma for data, rhetoric for reason.
- The new tools are now available on the Internet which means that for the first time parents will have direct access to detailed and independent information about their children's reading deficits.
- Parents and teachers will be able to generate on-line reports and may then begin to openly question both the time spent in preparing our current end-of-term reports and the reliability of the information being reported to parents.

The USA has already identified the need for reform. Can the rest of the English-speaking world afford to do less?

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The two principle researchers in VAS Research Pty. Ltd. are Byron Harrison and Jean Clyde.

Byron Harrison initially qualified as an optometrist but has many other interests. He has been an honorary probation officer, a board member of Life Line, a professional potter and local government councillor. He has co-written a book of prose and poetry and is one of the State's top public speakers. Today he combines a very busy optometric practice with research into children's literacy. He writes and lectures on literacy both here and overseas. He is a director of the software marketing company VAS Systems<sup>i</sup> and the Managing Director of VAS Research.

Jean Clyde has a background in textile design and a current interest in Celtic painting<sup>ii</sup> and webpage design. In addition she has a masters degree in Education with a special interest in the neuro-anatomy of memory. Jean was the co-founder of 'Basic Concern', Tasmania's leading remedial centre and has lectured throughout Australia and New Zealand. She is acknowledged by many authorities to be one of Australia's finest remedial teachers.

Jean and Byron combined to develop VAS Theory, described by one of Britain's leading educational researchers as "the most exciting development in literacy in a decade". They are currently co-authoring a textbook on literacy and designing remedial resources for the Internet.

# Phonics and Book Bands

by Jennifer Chew

The National Literacy Strategy recommends that early texts be chosen from *Book Bands*, a guide published by Reading Recovery. In general, these texts do not mesh in well with the NLS's own phonics lessons: a quick check done on six randomly-chosen *Book Bands* texts being used with children in the first term of reception in one school showed that under 20% of the words could be decoded on the basis of the phonics the children had been taught up to that point.

One piece of relevant research is a 1985 study done by Connie Juel and Diane Roper/Schneider. The account of this which may be most easily accessible for most people is on pages 275-280 of Marilyn Jager Adams's 1990 book *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. The researchers looked at two groups of children receiving near-identical phonics instruction: 'In the school district in which their study was situated, phonic instruction was tightly standardized across classrooms. ... Further, the phonics lessons were scripted such that the material taught, as well as the form and sequence of delivery, were controlled across classrooms'. One of the groups then practised their reading on texts which emphasised the decodable spelling patterns which they had been taught, whereas the other group practised on texts emphasising frequent rather than easily-decodable words. At the end of the year, 'despite their common and standardized phonics instruction', there were significant differences between the groups: the children who had practised on decodable texts were ahead.

Juel and Roper/Schneider sum up as follows:

'The selection of text used very early in first grade may, at least in part, determine the strategies and cues children learn to use, and persist in using, in subsequent word identification.... In particular, emphasis on a phonics method seems to make little sense if children are given initial texts to read where the words do not follow regular letter-sound correspondence generalizations. Results of the current study suggest that the types of words which appear in beginning reading texts may well exert a more powerful influence in shaping children's word identification strategies than the method of reading instruction'. (Juel, C. and Roper/Schneider, D. (1985). The influence of basal readers on first grade reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 18, 306-327).

RRF members have repeatedly made this kind of point to NLS and OFSTED officials, but the replies we have received have not been encouraging. We would again urge them to give more serious consideration to the possibility that better results are achieved when there is a closer match between texts and phonics lessons.

*Editor's comment:*

*We have indeed been trying hard to persuade the NLS team and Ofsted of the need for suitable reading material for beginner readers and strugglers. Readers might be interested in some snippets of evidence in support of this view:*

'Words containing letters not yet taught should not be presented for a child to read, and certainly not to read aloud.' (*Dyslexia in mainstream schools*, Johnson, Phillips and Peer)

'Dr Reid Lyon's NIH research is scientific and shows that students must learn to go from the smallest parts of the language (phonemes) and work their way through blending and segmenting until they are able to read entire paragraphs. While children are working through this decoding process in order to become independent

readers, they should also be listening to great pieces of literature being read to them so that they can build their core knowledge, vocabulary, literary, and sentence-structure abilities. Indeed they should be immersed in a literature-rich environment, but that does not mean that they need to read independently those texts for which they have not learnt the decoding skills.’ (Donna Garner)

‘So, if we’re working on “B”s and “A”s and “T”s, we don’t ask kids to read the word: can. We work on words like “bat” and “at”. And we give them practice using the tools that they are learning, so that they see the efficacy of those tools....’ (Dr Eunice Greer)

‘Research also shows that the use of decodable text-books and materials containing a high proportion of new words that adhere to phonetic principles students have already been taught – can help young students at the pre-primer and primer levels to master decoding skills and increase speed and fluency. For the vast majority of students, much of this can be accomplished before the end of first grade, enabling them to tackle the vast array of interesting and challenging children’s literature that can help expand vocabulary and increase background knowledge and comprehension.’ (*Resolution on Beginning Reading Instruction*, <http://www.aft.org/edissues/Readreso.htm> American Federation of Teachers - this site is worth visiting.)

#### **Extract from NLS team’s letter to RRF:**

‘The National Literacy Strategy does not consider that phonics should be taught through specially written books consisting of phonically regular words but through games – every day. Children should be allowed to read genuinely interesting, exciting and funny books. These are listed in Book Bands.’

#### **Extract from RRF’s reply to NLS team:**

‘It is very worrying that the writers of the National Literacy Strategy do not believe that young children should have decodable texts in the early stages of learning to read. They prefer the children to have interesting, exciting and funny books, even though they struggle to read them and frequently end up just memorising them. This is a poor policy for your able children but it is a disaster for the Early Literacy Support type of child. Please will you let [us] know the scientific research that this policy is based on?’

[Followed by RRF reference to the Juel and Roper/Schneider research]

In the Reading Reform Foundation Newsletter no. 46, Dr Marlynne Grant describes improvements in the reading and spelling ability of the children at St Michael’s Primary School when they were given decodable texts in the early stages of learning to read. Instead of being on average 12 months ahead on reading and 17 months ahead on spelling, they had jumped to **17 months** ahead on reading and **18 months** ahead on spelling. Adults may not find books with decodable text exciting but the children think they are fine. Their joy comes from the satisfaction of mastering the alphabetic code and reading the words all by themselves. The children are practising the most important strategy, which is blending or synthesising. Once there is fluency in this skill then the children are able to read anything, including all the genuinely interesting, exciting and funny books that you referred to.

By the way, the books in Book Band 1 are not interesting or exciting. They are repetitive and boring. [We] could accept this style of writing if the children learnt a great deal about reading from it. All that is learnt by the poorer reader is that reading involves learning a sentence by heart and looking at the picture for the new word. This deception damages the children and guides them away from the essential skill of blending.

[We] hope that those who have devised the NLS will change their policy about avoiding decodable texts. It is not acceptable that faulty ‘Whole Language’ methods are still being forced into schools by the DfES when there is plenty of evidence that they do not work...’

**And President Bush’s *Reading First* initiative based on extensive research says the same!**



**Copy of Written Reply from the  
Department for Education and Skills  
Monday 10 December 2001.**

THE LORD PRIOR asked Her Majesty's Government:

*whether the materials used to support the Early Literacy Support were tested on representative samples of matched experimental and control children with pre and post testing carried out using standardised tests before their introduction; and whether the results of any such tests will be made available to the public.*

(HL 1769)

BARONESS ASHTON:

The Early Literacy Support Programme, which is based on the teaching objectives in the National Literacy Strategy Framework for teaching, was piloted during 2000-01 in about 1000 Year 1 classes in 50 local education authorities. The pilot was monitored by OFSTED, who reported that:

“In general, the quality of teaching was good in the Year 1 lessons observed in the vast majority of schools. Pupils' responses to the intervention sessions were overwhelmingly positive. Teachers observed marked gains in pupils' confidence and willingness to contribute within the Literacy Hour.”

No experimental and control groups or standardised tests were used as part of the pilot.

C. Ashton

***Editor's comment:***

*Surely objective testing should be standard practice? We have yet to have a satisfactory explanation of why the DfES chose to test on a massive scale and yet with no control and comparison groups and no use of standardised reading tests. Some people have described me as unprofessional for writing the facts as I understand them, but can those same people defend this testing as good and accountable educational practice?*

*I hope that readers understand the enormous implications of this situation. Whereas LEAs are describing their current reading results as excellent if they reach the figure of 85% of children attaining level 2 or above at the end of key stage 1 tests, the RRF is describing how that figure should be virtually 100%. This is no small difference and our challenge to current thinking is of a very serious nature. Yet even in light of this evidenced challenge to current NLS advice, the DfES fails to conduct its tests scientifically. Why?*

# A Jolly Fine Term

by Nik Snape

I have no axe to grind, no bandwagon to follow. I work in a school with good reading results, with a team of progressive forward thinkers who took on the NLS whole-heartedly. But I'm hooked - line, sinker, rod, reel, fisherman, the lot. We embarked on the Jolly Phonics approach to literacy within our Foundation Stage in September of 2001 because of concerns about how our children were picking up the basics of literacy. The traditional combination of focusing on initial letter sounds and sight words at a slow laborious pace was applied because it's how it has always been done. No-one seemed able to challenge the fact that many children did not succeed using these methods, and in my role as SENCo I watched as they continued to struggle. I am as guilty, this is my fourth year as a Reception teacher (though not consecutively) and felt there had to be something better. I took the opportunity to discuss different approaches with our LEA Early Years team who suggested the approach of Jolly Phonics had been succeeding in another local school. On first look the handbook was not inspiring, but the multi-sensory approach appealed having seen the successes when applied with my SEN children throughout the school – it made sense to apply the theory from the beginning and perhaps meet the needs of many of these children from the outset, **before** they began to struggle and became switched off from literacy. Teaching the concept of the phoneme appearing anywhere in the word and that these can be combined to make words from the beginning also made so much more sense – providing the building blocks for reading and writing from the start.

However, caution ruled and I started with two phonemes a week with the usual sight word development. My class consisted of 10 children from the September intake, whilst I planned and oversaw the work with the Nursery full-time children (a group of 9 including a child with Downs Syndrome). Within two weeks I switched over to five phonemes a week with associated action, handwriting and soon blending techniques for reading and spelling. We took the radical (Headteacher's word) step of reducing the amount of words taught by 'sight' to those that cannot be blended from their phonemes. The Nursery full-time group switched over to 3 phonemes a week. We held a meeting with parents to explain the change of approach fully and enlisted an enthusiastic response. But the key was the children – they were enthused by the process and speed of learning. They wanted a new phoneme every day – their disappointment when I had a week of revising the digraphs was so heartening after years of plodding through the Reception curriculum looking for inspiring ways to work on 'i' for the fifth time with the same child.

After five more weeks I introduced the 'word boxes' for my Reception group. These are sets of ten words that contain the phonemes the children recognise to practise blending into words at home (and checked in school). These are returned daily - not learnt off by heart but changed so that they constantly have to apply their blending skills. Two weeks later we were introducing these to children in the Nursery full-time group – their thirst for reading was amazing and they knew what my children were doing and wanted to do the same.

At the same time I introduced nonsense words to the children on advice from colleagues on the senco-forum and after personally seeing the benefit these can have when working with dyslexics. The children were developing the blending techniques to work out words; therefore the intention was to make them consider the meaning of the word at the same time. They took to this enthusiastically – for some children it doubled the time it took to check the 'word boxes' because they just had to give the meaning of the word or an example of how it could be used.

So, what point did they reach after one term of teaching? We have now covered 42 phonemes. My weakest child regularly recognises 37 of these, applying them during reading. That child is now

beginning to blend words with 4 sounds in them, even blending some initial clusters whilst reading which is very pleasing. This child can spell cvc words accurately 90% of the time, write all the letters of the alphabet in response to the sound and of the 16 digraphs can write 8. This child will also often spot nonsense words and give an example where the word may be applied. All this after in September having no letter recognition, an inability to hear initial phonemes and having little concept of rhyme.

My strongest child can read all 42 phonemes and blends words with 5+ components. She can write 40 of the letter sounds consistently and has written the others on a regular basis. As you can imagine her spelling is excellent. The other children come within a range between, but all are improving their blending skills from day to day. We are still working on tricky words – New Ginn 360 is full of them - and we are currently working on Level 2 words in this scheme but 2 children are not picking up the Level 1 tricky words despite a diet of games/lotto/group/individual reading/parental support. This is a definite concern but I feel less of one when considering the range of words they can read through blending.

The Nursery Full-time children covered 40 phonemes; all the children know their letter sounds and some of the digraphs. A few know all of the phonemes. They can write most of these too. All are reading word boxes at cvc level or above for blending. The child with Downs Syndrome recognises 35 phonemes but is not yet able to blend (we are aiming to combine a sight based approach from next term whilst continuing the synthetic process). These children join my class from next term. The baseline results may be a little skewed this year!

I know all this will require revision and also application of their skills in a wider context. But all I can say is wow, what a term! I know I'm talking about one school, one cohort, one term, and one teaching team. But in that term the children have achieved more than in one year of the conventional approach to phonics. That can't be a fluke. I know that many people have been sceptical over synthetic phonics, but at the very least as a way of teaching phoneme/grapheme relationships I cannot fault it. The children are genuinely reading words, in combination with sight words that they have had to be taught and yes I do agree with the view that children learn in many different ways. I have worked with and designed programmes for enough Dyslexic/SEN children to see that their strengths and weaknesses are wide and varied, requiring an open-minded approach. However, we have to lay as firm a foundation for every child at the beginning of their school career as we can and as part of that synthetic phonics gives systematic knowledge of phoneme awareness and recognition that I have not seen surpassed by any other approach. Our Special Educational Needs Support teachers are beginning to take note, and there is now an over-subscribed 'Leading Teacher' for Jolly Phonics in our area. The message is spreading.

Of those of you who are sceptical all I ask is that you find a school in your area that does follow Jolly Phonics or another synthetic phonic scheme whole-heartedly. Go and have a look - see what it can do.

***Editor's comment:***

*Nik, your contribution to the RRF newsletter and your diary recount on the senco-forum have been invaluable. Well done, thank you and keep up the good work.*

# Is there a ‘baby in the bathwater?’

by Anita Weare

A short while ago I was talking with a special needs teacher about synthetic phonics teaching. During our conversation it became clear that despite having attended an intensive training course, she was not fully convinced that this form of teaching could stand alone and consequently alongside the synthetic phonics programme she was incorporating various elements of a more traditional analytic system. The reasoning behind this action was that she did not want to ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’. I wish that I had thought to ask which bits she viewed as ‘baby’ and which were ‘bathwater’ but sadly this only occurred to me much later. I do know however, that this teacher is not alone and that such mixing and matching is happening elsewhere to the detriment of many students and that is why I felt impelled to write this article.

When I first read about synthetic phonics teaching my initial reaction was to dismiss it out of hand. After all I had been brought up to believe that a quick fix was synonymous with poor workmanship and that anything worth achieving necessitated a great deal of time and effort. But then I read another article and then another, and each time a part of me wondered if there could possibly be something of value here. By this time I was really beginning to question what I was doing but without any clear idea of what direction to go in. A year later I listened to a talk on Phono-Graphix and was so inspired by the speaker that I signed up for a five day teaching course but all the time seeing it as an extra tool. It could be something to use alongside my traditional teaching methods but not as a whole programme by itself so I do understand how that teacher felt.

For the first few days of the course I constantly found myself silently asking “but what about suffixing, magic e, double letters, etc.” Quite when I stopped thinking like this I am not sure, but the simple logic of the system was slowly permeating a brain stuffed full of spelling rules and showing me that there might be a sensible alternative. Certainly watching the demonstration lessons opened my eyes although it was hard to imagine these students really had literacy difficulties as they were so confident and competent in the way they handled the various exercises; which were practising the necessary understanding and skills to unlock the English written code.

The course ended and I was itching to get started but there was still another six weeks of summer holiday before I could begin. This was when the fears set in again but this time there were self doubts as well. Could I deliver the goods? Was I a good enough teacher to convince my students that synthetic phonics was the answer and could I teach the new system effectively? September arrived and I had nine existing students, aged between 8 years and 13 years, to consider. Was it fair to tell them that after slogging through spelling rules, some for a year or more, that now we could ‘sort’ the problem in twelve hours? Was none of what I had been doing any good at all?

Since I was unable to identify any ‘babies’ in what I *had* been teaching, my choice now was between keeping everything or nothing. Since the former was no longer an option and because traditional analytic phonics and synthetic phonics are, by their very nature, incompatible, everyone’s first lesson consisted of ceremonially binning reading packs, spelling packs, and spelling rule worksheets together with establishing current reading and spelling ages. What a feeling of relief and not a word of protest. The logic of the new system shone throughout and no one minded that teacher and student were learning together, in fact students were delighted to point out my mistakes. They mastered the different techniques with far more ease than I and had **no** problem with understanding the concepts.

Twelve lessons later I repeated the assessments and considered the results. They were better than I had dared to hope. I admit to being surprised to find that overall the greatest improvements were

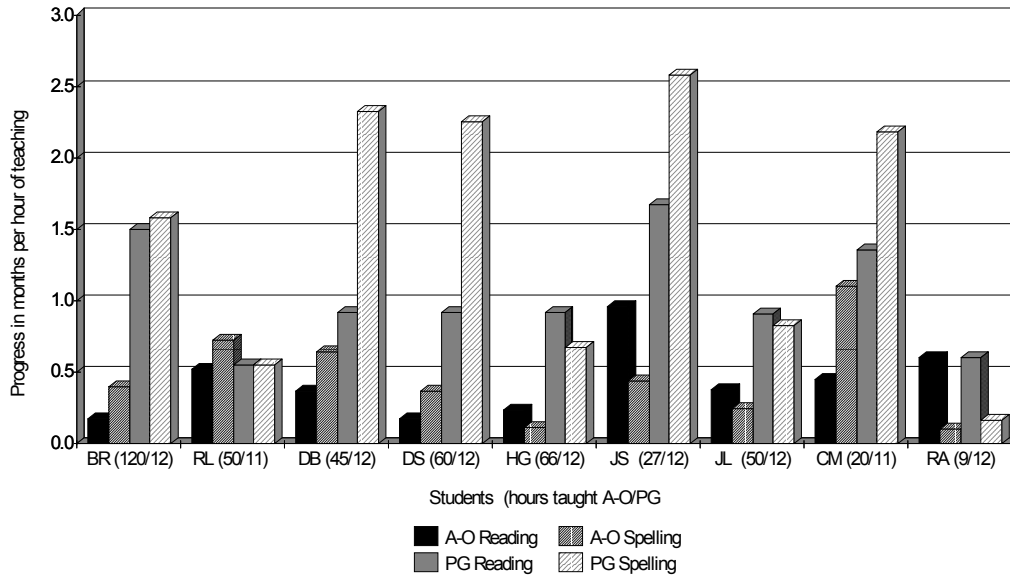
with spelling although the reading gains were also significant. There could be no doubt that my students could learn much faster than they had previously been given credit for and importantly, the skills were rapidly transferred into the classroom where teachers commented on the improvements. Nothing was lost and so much was gained. My students now had the knowledge, understanding and the skills needed for reading and spelling, therefore they had the tools that allowed them to apply an independent strategy.

That was eighteen months ago and I have since completed the course with another nine students and am currently teaching eleven more. I could never have hoped to help so many in such a short time using traditional methods when twelve to twenty four months teaching was the norm. During this time I have also taught a student who previously had twelve months of ‘mixed’ analytic and synthetic teaching and who had made no progress at all. She is now well on the way to becoming a fluent reader and speller.

Learning to change my beliefs was not without difficulties. First came the guilt, that I had unwittingly been making life harder for my students rather than easier, followed by annoyance that this information had been around for some time but that teachers were left to discover it for themselves. However, change I did, and all my fears proved unfounded. Would I go back to the old ways, or keep one tiny little spelling rule? No I would not and neither would any other teacher who teaches synthetic phonics exclusively - because we don’t need to.

Go on, you have nothing to lose but the bathwater!

**ANALYSIS OF IMPROVEMENT MADE IN READING AND SPELLING WITH  
ALPHA TO OMEGA AND PHONO-GRAPHIX**



Taking an average of 30 hours teaching (30 lessons) per school year, students need to make .4 months plus progress per hour of teaching merely to keep pace with the passage of time. Students whose progress is more than this (above the black line) are closing the gap. Progress that is less than .4 means that they are falling further behind.

*Editor’s comment:*

*I still value some spelling rules Anita, but I would be interested to discuss this further with the Phono-Graphix advocates. I believe they use the term spelling ‘tendencies’ as opposed to ‘rules’. Thank you for a touching article. I look forward to more information about P-G.*

# Research Digest

by Jennifer Chew

**Johnston, F.P. 2001. The utility of phonic generalizations: Let's take another look at Clymer's conclusions. *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 55 No 2, October 2001.** An old but influential study by Clymer (published in 1963) has persuaded many people that the phonic generalizations commonly taught to young children are not very useful. Francine Johnston (University of North Carolina) re-examined the data and reached rather different conclusions, in spite of the fact that she set herself a hard task in focusing only on vowel patterns, which are recognised as more difficult than consonant patterns. She found that the rules could be restated to make them much more reliable. For example, the first vowel has its 'long' sound over 95% of the time with *ay*, *ai* and *oa*. Words with *-air* and *-oar* can be considered either separately as 'r-controlled' or, at least in American accents, as needing only minor adjustment in pronunciation if initially sounded out with the first vowel's 'long' sound. With some digraphs for vowel sounds, the fact that the first letter does *not* 'do the talking' is compensated for by the near-100% reliability of the sounds in words (e.g. the *-aw*, *-oy* and *-oi* in *saw*, *boy* and *join*) or else by the fact that there is usually only a two-way choice (e.g. the *ow*, *ew*, and *oo* in *snow/how*, *blew/view*, *boot/book*). Johnston recommends that children should be encouraged to adopt a 'flexible strategy...such as trying more than one sound and checking the results with their oral language and context'. Some of her solutions work better in American accents than in British, but the general principles she offers would be easily adaptable.

**Connelly, V., Johnston, R., and Thompson, G.B., 2001. The effect of phonics instruction on the reading comprehension of beginning readers. *Reading and Writing: An interdisciplinary journal*, 14, 2001.** It is often claimed that whole-language teaching fosters better comprehension in children, even though phonics-taught children may be better at word-recognition. Connelly *et al.*, however, found the reverse: phonics-taught children were better not only at word-recognition but also at comprehension. The researchers compared Scottish phonics-taught children with a group in New Zealand who were matched on word-recognition ability but were taught by the characteristic New Zealand 'book experience' method, which encouraged reliance on context rather than on sounding out and blending. A particularly interesting finding was that 'Phonics taught children produced more contextually appropriate errors, and in both single word and text reading made more attempts at reading unknown words' – in other words, it seems that children actually make better use of context if they have first extracted all the information they can from the letters in the target word. 'Compared with the non-phonics group, the phonics group spent more time in attempts at identifying unknown words and this included using contextual information, which apparently resulted in more rehearsal of the meaning and hence better reading comprehension performance'.

**Ehri, L.C., Nunes, S.R., Willows, D.M., Schuster, B.V., Yaghoub-Zadeh, Z., Shanahan, T., 2001. Phonemic awareness instruction helps children learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis. *Reading Research Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3, July/August/September 2001.** This article covers much the same ground as the relevant section in the USA's National Reading Panel Report (2000). Studies on phonemic awareness (PA) had to meet stringent criteria in order to be included. An interesting finding related to the socio-economic status (SES) of at-risk readers: 'only 27% were low in SES while 37% were middle to high SES' (the SES of the remainder was not specified). It was found that focusing on just one or two PA skills (e.g. segmenting or segmenting and blending) was more effective than focusing on more PA skills, that 'Teaching PA effectively includes teaching the applications as well as the skill', that PA benefited comprehension as well as word-identification, and that 'PA instruction was more effective when it was taught with letters'.

**Macmillan, B.M. Rhyme and reading: A critical review of the research methodology. *Journal of Research in Reading*, Vol. 25 No. 1, February 2002.** Bonnie Macmillan carried out a meticulous examination of the research evidence behind the influential claims that rhyme awareness promotes reading ability. Much of the article is very technical, but the first three and last three pages are quite accessible even to non-academics. A major point made by Macmillan is that many of the research studies, while claiming to have found a clear causal link between rhyming ability and reading ability, are equally open to the interpretation that the really crucial factor is alphabet knowledge – the researchers have often simply overlooked this possibility. Another important point is that ‘The [rime analogy] strategy cannot, in fact, be considered a beginning reading strategy because some letter-sound decoding skill and a considerable sight vocabulary are needed *first*, in order to use it’. In the closing section of the article, Macmillan gives a very clear and simple account of what is necessary in order to read a cvc word: ‘letter-shape recognition, the left-to-right, letter-to-sound translation of each letter in turn, and the blending together of the three letter-sounds to pronounce the word’. This study raises some very serious questions about the thinking behind much of the National Literacy Strategy.

*Editor’s comment:*

*Examining research*

*Research requires very careful examination. It would be no surprise to find that we are generally desensitised to the “Research says...” statement, as we know instinctively that we must view research conclusions with caution. In any event, we invariably hear about research ‘third hand’ by which stage it may be less than accurately described. It seems to be human nature to use claims of ‘research’, even in good faith, to make us appear more authoritative in order to persuade others to move towards our own understanding, conclusions and preferences. Research is a complex minefield.*

*One difficulty can be that the very people who conduct any research unwittingly bring with them previous experiences and pre-conceived ideas. This can skew either the procedures of the research and/or the conclusions. To conduct research with an absolutely clear, logical, scientific and open mind is not an easy or straightforward task. In addition, by continuously building on experience and research, knowledge and understanding invariably grow and change over time. We know that charismatic and plausible individuals have had an unprecedented influence on how we teach reading despite the lack of scientific evidence to support new and inspiring philosophies. Having had our fingers well and truly burned, we must now take every step to guard against the propensity of fads and philosophies to sweep through our profession. Are we seeing history repeat itself?*

*It should be a valuable and valued exercise for others not involved in the original research to examine the processes and conclusions with a fine-tooth comb. Bonnie Macmillan and Jennifer Chew bring their analytical minds, a fresh viewpoint, and possibly a new dimension to the knowledge base and understanding. Such people seem to have a propensity for objectivity and analysis that is rarely so apparent in the rest of us.*

*Feelings can run high when research is re-evaluated, as reputations and many years’ work can be at stake. But should it be like this? If the researchers are truly scientific, is it so difficult for them to accept that all objectivity is to be welcomed, if it is to lead to better understanding for the benefit of others? Should it be so difficult to accept and acknowledge that understanding has ‘moved on...’? Isn’t this what our lives are all about?*

*We are probing deeper and further in an endeavour to learn more – and in the case of the teaching of reading we should be collectively and collaboratively trying to move towards greater effectiveness and inclusion for all. Is this what is happening everywhere or are people stuck with their old ideas, prejudices and preferences?*

*Even now, the RRF and others are seriously questioning one of the conclusions drawn from research in America which has influenced official advice in the UK. We suggest that there is no need to devote so much time and emphasis on developing phonemic awareness out of the sight of print - particularly in the case of teaching reading. Watch this space!*

# THRASS

## (Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills)

An RRF review

The RRF has been sent complimentary copies of THRASS-IT (an inter-active CD) and the large THRASS PICTURECHART and THRASS GRAPHEMECHART for evaluation. The charts are intended for classroom display. THRASS includes many other resources, but this evaluation relates only to those sent to the RRF and to the *Teacher's Manual*, a copy of which has been made available by one of our RRF members.

The THRASS-IT menu has six sections: THRASSCHART, WORDCHART, Handwriting, Reading, Spelling and Assessment. The first three of these offer 'Practice' and 'Play' options. The THRASSCHART covers 120 different spellings of the 44 phonemes of English – this is thorough, though the *Teacher's Manual* makes it clear that it would be unrealistic (we agree) to cover every possible grapheme for every phoneme – for example it omits the 'gh' spelling of the /f/ sound in 'cough'. In the 'Practice' mode, the user is prompted, by a voice and an instruction printed on screen, to 'Choose a phoneme', which actually means 'Click on one of the grapheme-boxes on the THRASSCHART'. The voice then pronounces the relevant phoneme. In the 'Play' mode, the voice pronounces the phoneme and the user has to click on one of the appropriate graphemes on the chart, whereupon the voice pronounces the phoneme again and also a THRASS word illustrating it (e.g. '/w/ - water').

The WORDCHART provides 120 words illustrating the 120 phoneme spellings of the THRASSCHART. The layout matches that of the THRASSCHART – e.g. the 'oo' and 'u' are in the first box on the bottom line of the THRASSCHART and the illustrative words 'book' and 'bull' are in the first box on the bottom line of the WORDCHART. 'Practice' and 'Play' modes in the WORDCHART section are similar to those of the THRASSCHART. In the 'Play' mode, however, a user who does not know the THRASS system can take a long time to find the word pronounced by the computer – e.g. it is not self-evident that the word 'letter' illustrates the 'tt' spelling of the phoneme /t/ and has to be found in the /t/ box.

In the Handwriting section, the only 'Practice' given is that the user is asked to click on 'the letter's start point'. This is understandable, however, as a computer screen is not an ideal place to practise letter-formation.

In the Reading section, a word is spoken by the computer and the user is asked to type it in a box, but as the printed form of the word remains displayed on the screen while one does so, all one has to do is copy it. In any case, it is hard to see this as a 'reading' activity. The Spelling section is slightly more challenging, although even here a lot of prompting is given. The Assessment section offers tests of Letter Name knowledge, Handwriting (again only the letter's start point), Word Recognition, Grapheme knowledge and Phonographic knowledge.

All sections on the CD are based entirely on the 120 THRASS words. This left us wondering how children are taught to transfer their knowledge to the reading and spelling of other words – the materials struck us generally as focusing much more on checking and reinforcing knowledge specific to THRASS than on generalisable skills. The CD provides some evidence to suggest that the material is not really aimed at beginners, not least because a fair amount of on-screen reading is required. In fact the *User Guide* itself suggests that children need some prior knowledge: 'When you first start using THRASS-IT we recommend that you diagnose the child's awareness of the following: *Letter Names; Letter Formation; Word Recognition* and *Graphemic Awareness* using the



relevant tests in the Assessment Section’ (p. 5). At this and a few other points (e.g. mysterious references to ‘the grey grapheme’, and the problem mentioned above of finding particular words on the WORDCHART), we felt that the THRASS-IT CD was not quite as much of a ‘stand-alone tool for teaching the THRASS methods and strategies’ as the *User Guide* claims (p. 4).

The *Teacher’s Manual* (1998) is rightly dismissive of the ‘One-Letter-Makes-One-Sound Method’ (OLMOSM) of phonics teaching but is perhaps unfair in implying that this method is more widespread than it probably is: there is no mention of programmes which predate THRASS but go well beyond OLMOSM - e.g. Joyce Morris’s 1970s *Language in Action* project, Mona McNee’s 1990 *Step by Step*, and Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham’s 1992 *The Phonics Handbook*. The fact is that the THRASS *Manual* continues, rather than initiating, a laudable tradition of doing justice to the complex way in which alphabetic writing works in English. We felt, however, that it did not give a clear enough idea of where one would start with absolute beginners. In fact, the *Manual*, like the CD *User Guide*, contains indications that THRASS may not really be intended for beginners: for example, in a box under the heading ‘The Reading Process’ on p. 29, THRASS is said to be ‘a support program for children who continue to have difficulty in developing the phonographic skills necessary for reading’, which suggests that it is intended less as a first-time teaching programme than as a programme providing strategies to supplement those which children are already using for word-identification. There are also indications that THRASS may actually regard whole-language strategies as the first resort for reading: ‘When children cannot read a word using picture or context clues, if it is appropriate for them to decode the word, encourage them to break the words [*sic*] into graphs, digraphs and trigraphs’ (p. 31). This sets it apart from what the RRF regards as synthetic phonics programmes, where the first resort for reading is producing phonemes for graphemes and blending (synthesising) the phonemes. In view of the fact that THRASS sets great store by giving children the ‘whole picture’ from the start where grapheme-phoneme correspondences are concerned, it seems somewhat anomalous that it should leave any room at all for guessing. One also wonders how children who ‘cannot read a word using picture or context clues’ would manage the more technical feat of breaking it into ‘graphs, digraphs and trigraphs’.

The THRASS materials available to the RRF provide useful resources for teachers and some activities which may be useful for children who are not absolute beginners. The focus, however, is more on isolated graphemes and phonemes seen from a distinctively THRASS perspective than on reading a wide range of whole words (not just THRASS words and not just parts of words) by sounding out and blending or spelling whole words by segmenting and writing down appropriate letters. It would be interesting to know what age-groups are actually using THRASS in schools and what improvement is reflected in test scores.

Enquiries about THRASS materials and courses: Tel. 01829-741413 or Fax 01829-741419.

## **Synthetic Phonics in Dundee**

by Lynda Booth

Dundee City Council’s READ project (Raising Early Achievement in Dundee) has established that synthetic phonics is the most effective method for teaching reading and writing. In 1999 the READ Support for Learning staff tutors in collaboration with the Educational Psychologist Service undertook a successful small research project. This investigated the extent to which children with literacy difficulties could be supported by using a synthetic phonics approach, based on teaching the skills of segmentation and blending in a structured way.

The children involved in the research made significant gains in reading and spelling, listening skills improved, motivation and self-confidence grew and their sight vocabulary was extended. In-service training was delivered as a follow up to the research and many schools decided to try out the synthetic approach. To begin with many schools trialled it alongside their existing phonic programme but after seeing the excellent results and the enthusiasm of their children they decided to implement it fully into the curriculum. Other schools adapted the parts of the synthetic phonic approach they liked best and ‘fitted’ it to their own programmes.

Attainment is greatly improved especially in the children’s independent writing. Teachers are looking out resources for their P1 children that they possibly might not have used until P2. Pupils are willing to ‘have a go’ at spelling, reading and writing due to confidence gained though having a strong, solid foundation of phonic knowledge.

We are now looking to sustain and extend that knowledge by developing spelling strategies and other phonic activities for further up the school.

While carrying out the research, the staff tutors based their programme and utilised many of their resources, adapting them for their pupils’ needs, on the *Phonics Handbook* by Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham. As a result of this a phonics handbook of games and activities was devised to support teachers working in all primary schools in the city. Christopher Jolly, Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham have approved our publication and stated that it was a useful, supplementary book for *Jolly Phonics*.

*Editor’s comment:*

First of all, congratulations on the excellent work undertaken in Dundee. Lynda Booth, READ staff tutor for Dundee City Council, has sent me the supplementary material *A Synthetic Phonics Approach to Literacy: Cracking the Alphabetic Code* for review. (Contact: Lynda Booth, email: advisers.ed@dundeeccity.gov.uk tel: 01382 434000). This material consists of a concise overview of rationale, advice and references with an enormous selection of photocopiable teachers’ resources to support the teacher in individual, group, whole-class work and for developing partnerships with parents. There is surely something for everyone in this bumper bundle, although I hope the ‘initial letter games’ are not used in excess as synthetic phonics is ideally about letters and sounds all-through-the-word. Also, at this point may I remind everyone of Bonnie Macmillan’s conclusions (RRF newsletter no. 46) that phonemic awareness is most effectively developed in the sight of print.

In the section on Rationale, I would like to draw attention to one statement which is open to question: ‘Teaching children to use a phonics approach is meant to *enhance*, not *replace*, the wide range of word attack skills which also need to be taught to aid accuracy, fluency and comprehension, with the ultimate aim of enabling and encouraging them to read for enjoyment.’ This must come with a health warning. Synthetic phonics teaching is entirely about synthesising for the *main* decoding strategy, with no initial sight vocabulary. Focusing on a ‘wide range of word attack skills’ will undoubtedly dilute or distort the effectiveness of synthesising for decoding and also instil damaging guessing reading habits. Whereas there are different ways that various people *can* learn to read, research has shown that the best readers are automatic synthesisers. It is less skilled readers, by contrast, who use context to identify words. ‘The hallmark of a skilled reader is fast *context-free* word identification. And rich *context-dependent* text understanding.’ (C. Perfetti: ‘Cognitive research can inform reading education’, *Journal of Research in Reading*, Vol. 18 No. 2, September 1995).

‘Every facet/tenet of whole language fails every test of validity or effectiveness. It damages children, even good readers, and promotes ideas that are false/unproven. Since whole language is anti-science, co-existence with any science-based program is illusory. Its literature choices violate children’s decoding ability, so “trial and error” take over. Would you let your child learn street-crossing by trial and error? We must let science decide.’ (Stanovich, 1993-4)

Whatever advances are being made in Scotland, I hope that they are not undermined by the continued 'balancing' of whole language and synthetic phonics. This is to misunderstand synthetic phonics teaching in its most effective form.

Further I am not too happy about the following statement: 'However, research literature highlights that the teacher is more important than the method.' (Harrison C 1996 – *Methods of Teaching Reading*). Whereas we are all aware of the difference good teachers can make in the classroom, many excellent teachers have still failed their children by using the whole language and look and say teaching methods. As reading standards have dropped in recent decades and we have a resulting very high percentage of illiteracy, this cannot be attributed to a dearth of good teachers alone. Without underestimating the value of good teachers, nevertheless the fact that we can achieve markedly better results from a change of method – same teachers - shows that the method can be an *essential* factor in successful teaching. Equally, an appropriate method in the hands of even mediocre teachers is capable of having good effect. What we need is deployment of effective approaches along with good understanding of the issues and measuring the outcomes – these features in combination may inspire teachers to become even better as they are empowered by evidence-based approaches to succeed! In any event, much of the work of synthetic phonics teaching is perfectly well-accomplished by knowledgeable teaching assistants and partnerships between teachers and their assistants are invaluable.

*I have heard from several teachers and advisers throughout Scotland (where evidence-based literacy teaching is spreading rapidly) that the Reading Reform Foundation newsletter is recommended reading. Scottish articles and reading results should be on their way in the near future and I do congratulate those individuals in Scotland who have promoted synthetic phonics teaching and made a substantial difference. Keep up the good work.*

## Teaching Grownups

by Christopher Morgan

I have only recently become a reader of this newsletter. I am not an educationalist but merely a grandparent, vastly concerned that my grandchildren should learn to read without stress, and enjoy happy, literate lives. Their schools have not always succeeded in this so I can appreciate the importance of the arguments discussed in the newsletter, but I would be mortally afraid of entering the fray myself. Except perhaps in one aspect which is that I wonder whether teachers trust and involve parents enough. The real subject of my contribution, however, is teaching prisoners.

They say that, depending on your definition of illiteracy, there are between 4 and 6 million non-readers in Britain, unable to earn their living by other than the crudest means. It is no surprise that quite a few of these soon find themselves in our prisons, 40% of whose inmates are illiterate. The prisons have Education Departments charged to teach prisoners basic skills and they try hard in difficult circumstances and on shrinking budgets. It is very difficult to teach a grownup to read in a class. Most have long since given up and concentrate their skills on hiding their deficiency. If they can be persuaded to attend classes, they are apt to sit at the back and let it wash over them. They are not allowed to take the prison's education books back to their cells. Few make any real progress and yet their imprisonment offers a wonderful chance for them to learn. It is this which got me involved.

Some years ago, I joined a pen-friend scheme, run by the Prison Reform Trust, and found myself corresponding with a lifer. What our correspondence revealed about prison life was so disturbing that the letters were published in a book called *The Invisible Crying Tree*. I did not want to earn money from it and he could not, so we set up a trust to help prisoners prepare for the out. After some hesitation, we decided that the best way would be to launch a literacy scheme. That was back in 1997. I was advised by the then Director of the Prison Service to take it to Wandsworth. "If it works there," he said, "it will work anywhere."

The idea behind the scheme was to recruit better-educated prisoners to teach illiterate ones ‘on the wing’, that is to say, in their free time and not in the education department. To make this possible, we donated enough *Toe by toe* manuals for every teacher and pupil (mentor and mentee in prison language) to have one. We also supplied stationary to help them keep track of their progress. The lessons were to be short (maximum of 30 minutes), daily and one-on-one. Seen from the outside, it seemed so simple.

For many reasons, it has not been simple. The cynicism of the prison service is certainly one of them but absolutely understandable. It must be unbelievably disillusioning to work every day in a place like Wandsworth. Do-gooders float in and out of prisons with the best intentions but are never there when the going gets tough, when a man goes mad with drugs or the bullies decide to burn out a sex-offender’s cell. Do-gooders are therefore viewed with suspicion by the staff and so were we.

But they tried hard and we soon began to discover other problems. One was to find volunteer mentors. We did not ask much of them but one thing was to agree to stay in Wandsworth for another year. Well, the top priority for most Wandsworth inmates is usually to get sent somewhere else, anywhere else, as soon as possible. Nevertheless, we gradually accumulated a little pool of mentors who saw that it could be more worthwhile to spend their days teaching than sewing mailbags.

Given that 40% of the inmates were probably non-readers, we did not think it would be too hard to find mentees. How wrong we were! First of all, of course, they could not read notices we put on the board! Secondly, their main pre-occupation was to hide their inability, not to admit to it. Even those who became aware of what was on offer were loath to come forward. Prisons are macho places where inmates do not want to look like goody-goodies trotting off to their lessons. Meanwhile the prisons had little idea where to look for candidates although recently they have introduced induction tests which cover the new intake. Some prisons have internal broadcasting systems but not Wandsworth. We had huge difficulties in finding mentees.

One way and another, we apparently made progress but then a key mentor would be posted elsewhere or there would be trouble between a mentor and a mentee and everything would collapse. By the spring of 2000, we were near giving up and I wrote to Wandsworth withdrawing the offer, but they asked for one more meeting. This was attended by a remarkable man called Neil Lodge who was an ordinary officer on the VPU (Vulnerable Prisoners Unit for sex offenders, ex-policemen and others at risk on the main wing). The VPU offered certain advantages because its population is more stable and they are never allowed out for work or any other reason. But the main thing was that Neil was really seized by the scheme’s potential and could see how our amateurish ideas could be made to work in a gaol.

Within weeks it became clear that what had so long lain dead in the water was now on the move. He soon had six mentors and some twenty volunteers as mentees, and we found that twenty constituted a critical mass enabling others to overcome their embarrassment. Keda Cowling, author of *Toe by toe*, came down from Yorkshire and talked inspirationally to them all. The project has never looked back. That is not to say that there have not been problems. Gaols have more problems than outsiders can imagine, but Neil and what soon became his team of inmates were not to be discouraged.

What I, for one, had not anticipated was the speed of their success. Not all mentees, of course, started from the same level. There were some who found the early stages of the course too easy but, while some might steam more quickly than others, none were allowed to bypass one line of one lesson. Not all mentees were in fact illiterate. The *Toe by toe* scheme is very helpful for foreigners wanting to master English. But most are out and out illiterates and yet, with very few exceptions,

their progress has been phenomenal. Some broke through within months and now, sixteen months later, over forty mentees have graduated joyfully as readers, and it hasn't cost anyone a penny. Well, to be accurate, it costs our trust £15 a time. We now have a waiting list of candidate mentees and several once troublesome inmates have calmed down.

For me, it is little short of a miracle. It is the same for those taking part. In the summer of 2001, we held a little ceremony in Wandsworth to hand out the first batch of certificates to graduates, confirming that they had completed the course and could now read. I attended and found it quite moving, so undisguised was their happiness. One after another came to thank us and plead with us to spread the scheme through the whole prison system.

What is the secret? Well, one is the *Toe by toe* system. I am sure most readers are familiar with it and I am not going to try and categorise it between the various methods discussed in the more learned articles on these pages. One of its great virtues from our point of view is the discipline it imposes on mentor and mentee alike. Together they must conquer every page. Another is its demonstrative way of measuring progress, so that the mentee can see how well he's progressing towards his goal. We have introduced quite a lot of barely necessary form filling to emphasise this concept of progress and, after all, prisoners have plenty of time to fill in forms. But I think the real key is short daily lessons one-on-one.

Some years ago, although not a professional teacher, my wife used to help in classes run by the LCC for adult illiterates. Having had to pay for their course, these really wanted to succeed but they only came once a week. They tried hard, took away homework, were helped by their families and returned week after week having more or less lost all that they had gained so far. Looking back, there were probably two reasons for the lack of progress. One was that the lessons were far too long. Half an hour is maximum for the sort of concentration required but it is, of course, ridiculous to expect someone to bus back and forth across London for a half-hour lesson. But, far more disastrous, it did not happen every day. Something newly learnt requires repetition and repetition soon, if it is going to stick. Equally, I am sure with children learning to read, a little every day and one-on-one is part of the secret. This is where the parents can support the teachers to work in a genuine partnership.

My co-author of *The Invisible Crying Tree* is called Shannon and our Trust is called after him. We are now trying to carry the message to other prisons and are already in discussion with several but we are a long way from covering all 160. Anyone who believes in what we are doing and would like to help in any way is most welcome.

The Shannon Trust, Pinehurst Farm, Steep Road, Crowborough, TN6 3RX

*Editor's comment:*

Keda Cowling's *Toe by toe* manual sounds ideal for the prison circumstances as described by Christopher. I appreciate Christopher sharing this information with us and wish the Shannon Trust well with their future work. We hope that we can be kept updated as to the spread and success of this project throughout British prisons.

Keda Publications has now brought out *An Aid to Comprehension* manual. *Stride Ahead* has been written for students who can read but have difficulty in understanding what they are reading possibly because their minds are being too involved with the mechanics of decoding the written language to be able to give adequate attention to meaning. The *Stride Ahead* programme is not recommended for students until they have a reading age of 8 and a half years or above. For further information phone 01274 – 588278, or visit the ***Stride Ahead*** website at [www.strideahead.co.uk](http://www.strideahead.co.uk) . As always, the RRF would be interested in any results from using this programme.

*Editor's comment continued:* Whilst on the subject of one to one teaching, this would be a good opportunity to mention the work of *Springboard for Children*. The mission states "Springboard for children provides a literacy lifeline for children with learning difficulties in inner city primary schools. A team of specialist teachers and trained volunteers offers one-to-one literacy teaching, to help children realise their full potential." Springboard's work was featured in the *Telegraph magazine* (26 January 2002) in a very positive light. For further information including donations or volunteering please contact *Springboard for Children*, 132 Friary Road, Peckham, London SE15 5UW (phone 020 – 7635 6797), [www.springboard.org.uk](http://www.springboard.org.uk) Naturally we wish Springboard well and hope to learn more about it over time.

## Jolly Phonics Part 4

by Sue Lloyd

The development and launch of *The Phonics Handbook* was covered in the previous newsletter. Having *The Phonics Handbook* shown on the television was a lucky start for us and just what we needed. As the majority of educationalists and teachers considered phonics unnecessary we knew we had an uphill struggle. It was still fashionable to criticise phonic teaching, testing and structured learning. However, things were about to change. Members of the government were painfully aware that far too many children were not able to read and write satisfactorily. They believed that a lack of phonics in the teaching was one of the major causes. In an effort to try and put this right, some phonics was included in the National Curriculum.

Many teachers, now that phonics was being recognised as important again, bought *The Phonics Handbook* and followed the teaching in it. They found that the children enjoyed the style of teaching and made much greater progress than before. The schools that followed the instructions and monitored the progress of their children found that their children were generally a year ahead of their chronological age in reading and a bit more in spelling by the end of the reception year. Often they reported to us that the children were doing as well as the Year 1 children who had not had the synthetic teaching of Jolly Phonics. This was exactly our experience when we introduced this phonic teaching back in the 70's.

At about the same time I went on a few courses about the teaching of phonics in Suffolk. To my amazement the course tutors were talking about the importance of developing 'onset and rime'\* and phonological awareness for beginner readers. I was pleased to hear about the phonological awareness because we had been teaching our children to identify the sounds in words for years and knew how useful this was for developing their writing skills. However, the 'onset and rime' was a disturbing element. How could young children possibly learn all the hundreds of 'rime' patterns? I knew it was hard enough for the children to master even one spelling for each of the 42 sounds in Jolly Phonics. I explained this to the advisers and asked them to come to our school to see our structured phonic programme. They never came.

The Suffolk advisers had mentioned that the 'onset and rime' had been chosen because of the research carried out by Dr Usha Goswami. I think they recognised that in the previous years they had promoted the 'real books approach' (also known as 'whole language') and that it had been a failure for far too many children, so this time they wanted to choose something that was supported by research. This 'new phonics', developed from Dr Goswami's research, was just what they needed. It was different from the old letter-by-letter sounding out 'c-a-t' says cat, which they had been adamantly against for years and would find difficult to promote. Naturally I wanted to find out more about the research, so I attended a conference in Ipswich where Dr Goswami was giving a lecture. In her lecture she explained that young children were more able to hear the 'onset and rime' of a word than

the individual phonemes and that it seemed sensible to start with an 'onset and rime' method of teaching, that is teaching the consonant sounds for the onset and teaching the hundreds of rime patterns for the rime. She also demonstrated that the children could use analogy. The children were shown the word 'beak' and from that they could work out the words 'peak' and 'weak' by exchanging the initial sound. This seemed very complicated phonics to me. I thought of all the <ea> rime patterns that the children would have to learn by sight: -ead, -eaf, -eag, -eak, -eal, -eam, -ean, -eap, -ear, -eas, -eat, and -eav. It was much easier to learn that <ea> usually has an /ee/ sound and then all the regular <ea> words can be blended. Also, no account was taken of the real situation in the classroom. When children come across a word that they cannot read, which is the majority of the words in the beginning, there is not an adult giving them a clue word, as was provided in the research experiment. Research by Prof. Philip Seymour and his colleagues have shown that children cannot use analogy properly until they have a reading age of 7+ years. By then they have a big store of words that they know, and they are able to recognise patterns in these words and apply them to their unknown words. Dr Goswami also produced charts to show that the children who had had this type of teaching were better than those who had not. It all sounded very plausible.

At this stage of my understanding, when Dr Goswami said that young children were not able to hear the individual phonemes in words, I was able to explain to her that it was relatively easy to **teach** the children to hear the individual phonemes in words and that most of our children were able to do this in their first term. I invited her to see it in action at our school. She didn't take up the offer.

Later on I was given a copy of the test that Dr Goswami used for her research. I tried it out on our children, who on a British Picture Vocabulary Scale test were poorer than the sample of children that were used in the original experiment; thereby showing that our children had no intellectual advantage. Our children not only scored considerably higher but also were a year younger when they took the test. If Dr Goswami had used our children as part of her research, she would have seen that the children taught with synthetic phonics were far more advanced than the 'onset and rime' children and even more so than the children who had virtually no phonics. Although Dr Goswami and the advisers were correct when they pointed out that the 'onset and rime' children were better than the control group, they were totally wrong to assume that it was the best approach or even a good one. This just goes to show how easy it is for researchers and advisers to get it wrong. We need different attitudes in education and far more accountability. Why did the Suffolk advisers not try out their ideas on a small sample of schools, using standardised reading and spelling tests, before attempting to spread the practice to all schools? Why did Dr Goswami and the Suffolk advisers not look or listen when their initiatives were challenged? Also, in the wider context, why were the DfES initiatives not scientifically tested before being foisted onto the LEA's advisory staff and teachers in schools? These questions I shall try to address in the last part of the Jolly Phonics story.

\* Onset and rime is an approach which focuses on individual phonemes only when they are single consonants or consonant clusters at the beginning of words. The rest of the word (or syllable, in longer words) is treated as a single unit. So 'cat' is not treated as consisting of three phonemes but as consisting of two chunks: an initial consonant phoneme (the 'onset') and a rime chunk ('-at'); 'beak' is 'b-eak'; 'crab' is 'cr-ab'; 'sprinkling' – 'spr-ink-l-ing'.

# **An evaluation of the National Literacy Strategy from a teacher's perspective**

by Debbie Hepplewhite

The advent of the National Literacy Strategy has focused attention on the need for teachers to improve their practice in an endeavour to raise national literacy standards as a matter of urgency. Many people speak almost loyally of the NLS and it is probably true to say that as teachers, we have all gained something from the impetus, associated training and increased resources. I certainly have.

We have seen some improvement in literacy standards, although there is some question as to the degree of 'embeddedness' of these gains, what 'grooming' has taken place in order for children to reach expected levels or beyond, and what losses there have been in terms of a narrowing of the curriculum.

According to the DfES, the National Literacy Strategy has achieved international acclaim for its sheer scale and impact. Certainly the external evaluation of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education commissioned by the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, describes the National Strategies in a positive light. The report also noted, however, the reservations and observations of advisers, heads and teachers and indicated the need to address 'the balance between central direction and local (i.e., LEA and school) initiative and the role of the larger "infrastructure" of the teaching profession.'

From my perspective as a practising teacher, I have been extremely concerned about the singular lack of official opportunity for teachers to discuss the contents of the NLS and to provide feedback of their evaluations. So unwelcome were my comments at both LEA and DfES levels because of their challenging nature, that ironically this has led me to study in depth the field of the teaching of reading and as a further consequence I have now become the editor of the Reading Reform Foundation newsletter.

Through the RRF newsletters I have described the urgent need for a full evaluation of the *National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teachers* and the additional NLS initiatives. There should arguably be local forums, and teachers must not be made to feel like heretics or revolutionaries simply because they may have opinions which challenge current thinking and advice. Such different viewpoints may be based on considerable knowledge and experience, and may be supported by objectively measured reading results.

## **My general comments on the format of the National Literacy Strategy**

At the time of my initial introduction to the National Literacy Strategy, I commented that the Literacy Hour format was a 'red herring' in the business of what and how we should teach children to read and write. There is a vast difference between 'pace' in teaching, and clock-watching. I felt that teachers should not be put under this degree of prescriptive time and classroom management pressure with its consequential onerous planning regime. Teaching styles are as varied as the personalities of the teachers. This is to be valued. I, for one, cannot work in a hurry and cannot work to a clock. Others may thrive on a strict routine. Such variety should not affect the outcomes of the teaching so long as those teachers know what to do and in what order. I welcome ideas for teaching in my classroom and have only recently been trying out a completely different question and answer approach with my class with which I am delighted. This demonstrates that I am not stuck in my own habits and am open to suggestion – but not dictation, and not when I know the advice is fundamentally flawed from the outset.



Guiding teachers as to approximate time-scales for teaching the objectives and informing them of the standards achievable is an entirely different matter from expecting teachers to behave like clones in the classroom.

## **The teaching of reading**

Teaching children to decode is a sequential process. First you learn this, then this, followed by this. It is a presumption nowadays that every setting is ‘literacy-rich’ and that looking at books, sharing them, talking about the stories – thus developing vocabulary and comprehension - is an ongoing activity in the early years. Although Tony Blair and David Blunkett talked at some length about the fact that research showed we needed phonics teaching to improve reading standards, who could ever have imagined that the discredited whole language guesswork reading strategies would find themselves at the core of the National Literacy Strategy advice? I was not well-versed in the Reading Wars when I received my first NLS training on reading, but I was positively baffled about being told of the importance of my pupils looking at the pictures and guessing, guessing from the story (when the child can’t read it in the first place) and guessing from the initial letter. This is still current advice with blending the very poor relation. I have heard the guessing strategies described in the most expressive, impressive and plausible language, but guessing is guessing no matter how you put it.

Such instructions seemed totally bizarre to me and I knew that when I inherited children from previous teachers, it was the strugglers who resorted to guessing and it was the lack of blending which held up progress. Children I received from teachers who had taught with these guessing strategies made up not only single words, but also frequently whole phrases! Here was the state-of-the-art NLS telling me to teach in this way and I was shocked and dismayed. Further, the original Framework for Teachers (yet to be modified or discarded) spread the teaching of a few digraphs over the three years of reception, year one and year two. This was nonsensical and yet when I questioned my literacy adviser, she supported the advice – although to give her credit she also forwarded my evaluation sheet of the training to Dr Laura Huxford. Dr Huxford kindly phoned me to discuss my comments, but we had to agree to differ. This has been the pattern ever since – having different views and moving no further forwards.

About a year after the introduction of the NLS, the *Progression in Phonics* manual was brought out with attempts to speed up the introduction of the phonemes. The Reading Searchlight Strategies were again promoted on page 1. The disc which accompanied this publication showed whole language guessing strategies under the very section of ‘phonics’.

The NLS throws all levels of knowledge and skills at the children through its Literacy Hour format of word, sentence and text level. Every day, children will be presented with levels of work beyond them, and precious teaching time is squandered on over-complicated activities which require a lot of preparation.

This 'word, sentence, text' principle, which is the same for every year throughout the primary school, is a glaring mistake. With correct teaching in the infant years, far greater emphasis should be placed on text level and extended writing in the junior years. Rigorous and systematic phonics teaching in the infant years should have laid down the foundations for a different approach to literacy at key stage 2. The Literacy Hour format at this stage could aptly be described as a ‘white elephant’.

Graham Frater in his book *Effective Practice in Writing at Key Stage 2* states diplomatically how a variety of leading schools with reduced reading/writing gaps have ‘adopted, adapted and extended’ the National Literacy Strategy. He describes the features they have in common; they ‘discarded the literacy hour’s clock (i.e. its recommended partitioning of lesson time), but retained its emphasis on

pace;’ ‘ensured that extended time for extended writing was frequently and regularly available;’ and ‘commonly gave text level work the clear priority in their plans and lessons alike.’ Does this sound familiar?

Frater then also says in his evaluation; ‘As will emerge, still less can the survey schools’ achievements be attributed to their adhering exclusively, or even always closely, to the NLS’s recommendations. *All these schools did much more than the NLS prescribes*, and they sometimes did it differently.’ [Frater’s italics]

If such schools have achieved a higher measure of success than others, then surely those aspects which they have in common should be noted. It could well be that not only is the NLS flawed badly in the early years, but it also needs *considerable* rethinking for key stage 2. We need the kind of feedback that Frater has afforded us, but we also need to stop speaking as if the NLS is something to be revered and preserved. It should be acceptable to say something is not right about it, so let’s adjust it accordingly. This should involve taking it apart entirely and examining all its elements with no sentimentality or loyalty whatsoever. We can preserve or modify the best bits, add others where necessary and discard the parts which consensus or evidence show to be flawed.

The DfES must also stop rolling out initiative after initiative trying to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. It is simply not acceptable to conduct pilot studies without pre- and post- testing using standardised tests and without control and comparison groups. It is time that we were all allowed to have a fresh look and moved on from the original.

## Notes relating to the teaching of reading in the NLS

### STRUCTURE:

- The NLS is organised on a year-by-year basis, irrespective of whether the children can decode.
- Equal emphasis is placed on comprehension and on decoding at a time when the children cannot decode.
- The structure is the same for all children, regardless of their stage of learning or their abilities; for example, ONLY 15 minutes of word level work is allotted whether or not the child can actually read.

### PHONICS:

- Because the NLS 200 words are lumped together for children to learn by 7, teachers invariably teach them by ‘look and say’ (as noted in HMI report Teaching of Phonics, October 2001). Most of these words are phonically regular and learning through look and say does not develop any decoding skills for the learning of the ‘next’ word.
- Although the objectives are reasonably clear in *Progression in Phonics*, the activities themselves grossly slow down the teaching. There are 5 or 6 activities for each objective and these activities take longer to teach than the objectives. Many of these time-consuming games also require time-consuming preparation.
- The phonics lessons stress analytic phonics as much as synthetic phonics. Is this the right balance when children cannot read? Programmes which favour working from symbol to sound (synthetic phonics) have the side effect of producing excellent spelling results into the bargain. Programmes which favour working from sound to symbol (analytic phonics) produce weaker readers.
- Synthetic phonics (blending) is restricted to games and not transferred to reading text.
- The time-scale for introducing phonics is different in the *Progression in Phonics* manual from the *NLS Framework*. Not all teachers know that it has changed.

### GUIDED READING:

- In guided reading, children READ TEXTS AT THEIR LEVEL FOR A TOTAL OF ONLY 20 MINUTES A WEEK.

- The teacher has to deal with 6 children at a time in 10 minutes (for two sessions per week) or 20 minutes (for one session per week). This is not much time especially if the children are weak or non-readers.
- These texts do not necessarily link with the shared text at the start of the lesson or with the word level work.
- Sequential reading schemes are not recommended (and even the *Early Literacy Support* programme for weaker Year 1 readers recommends look and say books rather than decodable phonics books).
- The texts from guided reading are unlikely to be sent home for reinforcement and in any event look and say books are not appropriate.
- The NLS trains teachers to use guesswork reading strategies for dealing with texts – never blending.

#### GROUP WORK:

- In group work, what can children realistically do on their own when they cannot read, while the teacher spends 20 minutes on guided reading? They are probably given some form of ‘busy work’ consisting of copying, filling in and colouring. This busy work therefore accounts for at least 80 minutes of the literacy hour sessions compared to the 20 minutes of guided reading per week.

#### ***We hear a lot about tracking, so how does the Literacy Hour look for a Year 1 child who cannot read?***

- Shared text – he follows a book that he cannot read for 20 minutes a day which reminds him that he cannot read.
- He tries to keep up with word level work, but still does not know his basic sounds - so most of the work goes over his head.
- Twice a week for 10 minutes (or once a week for 20 minutes), he reads with his bottom group who cannot read. Chances are that the books are in any event look and say at this level. At best he guesses the words largely unsuccessfully. Once again, he is reminded that he cannot read. He can't take these books home to read anyway.
- In the independent slots on other days (80 minutes per week), he is probably given ‘busy work’.
- As our struggling reader goes through school, teachers are less knowledgeable about teaching early reading and invariably the child is passed on to an assistant. These assistants have been trained on different programmes (same objectives, different activities). The teachers may not be aware of what the assistants do day by day. The work does not necessarily tie in directly to what is taught in the lesson.

A teacher in Year 3 and above has to teach children who have reading ages between 5 and 13 years. The planning is a nightmare. Even good teachers find this beyond them. Most say they manage, but if you delve, the reality is they do not meet the needs of the poor readers.

Since the NLS started there has been one programme after another to teach the same decoding skills: Additional Literacy Support (ALS) for juniors, Progression In Phonics (PIPs) for reception, Early Literacy Support (ELS) for Year 1 catch-up children, and further NLS initiatives in KS2 and KS3 are being rolled out now. Each requires new training - all to teach phoneme-grapheme correspondences. The programmes are riddled with time-consuming activities including numerous games, cut, paste and make. If these programmes were working properly, we would not need more and more initiatives.

#### **In conclusion**

I look forward to a new *NLS Framework for Teachers* based on up-to-date understanding of the scientific evidence and classroom findings. We simply must move on and understand what does work the most effectively in the teaching of reading so that we can all aim for 100% success.

## The buck stops here

Some have tried to dismiss out of hand what the RRF is promoting by seeing it only as an undesirable extension of the notorious Reading Wars. No one can deny the chasm of understanding between people who think the teaching of reading is best taught in entirely different ways.

The question could be asked *'Well is it as long as it's short? Are the eventual outcomes pretty much the same?'* And that is where attempts at compromise, balancing, and advocating a mix of everything to address different learning styles becomes a dangerous mish-mash tantamount to gambling – rather than basing the teaching of reading on evidence of what works best. Currently some children will thrive however they are taught; some survive and do 'get there' eventually; others get well and truly left by the wayside.

The very strategies which the RRF describes as damaging to children are at the very heart of how most teachers have been, and are being, trained to teach reading and in reality these strategies are inevitably used as a resort to cope with the current look/say and whole language reading books.

### **This is how the evidence is looking:**

- Synthetic phonics schools expect virtually 100% of their Year 2 children to achieve level 2 or above in the end of key stage 1 tests for reading, spelling and writing.
- However, many people in authority consider an 85% reading success rate excellent. The implication is that those schools where reading and writing success is substantially less than 100% need to address how they are teaching reading. If schools following the NLS advice closely are not achieving almost 100%, they need to appreciate that they are failing many of their children and recognise that the NLS eclectic advice is at odds with scientific research.
- If there is a big discrepancy in the end of key stage 1 results with maths being much stronger than literacy, schools need to consider looking at their method of teaching reading.
- America, Scotland, Canada and New Zealand have concluded that evidence-based synthetic phonics teaching is the most effective and inclusive. Synthetic phonics teaching programmes are spreading rapidly throughout these countries. In the light of this, should all schools be investigating synthetic phonics teaching for themselves?

Please note that synthetic phonics programmes taught in conjunction with an initial sight vocabulary and the Reading Searchlight Strategies, are unlikely to result in the highest reading and writing levels possible.



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