

## Early reading: researched do's and don'ts

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# Reading Reform Foundation Committee Members:

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## Dear Readers,

*This newsletter has been timed to coincide with the beginning of the academic year and will reach nearly 6,000 inner city schools, the Education Directors and the teacher training establishments. It can be downloaded free from the RRF website. We hope that it will aid infant teachers in their planning, and give them the confidence to focus on teaching letter(s)-sound correspondences and all-through-the-word blending for reading in place of the misguided advice of the 'text down' NLS Early Literacy Support programme (see Dr. Bonnie MacMillan's evaluation of the ELS initiative p.11).*

*Fiona Nevola's case studies (p.3) demonstrate clearly that teaching the alphabetic code with blending for reading and segmenting for spelling are the empowering factors for children with literacy special needs. Revealingly, Fiona stresses that the description of children's difficulties exactly **matches** the whole language and guessing methods that as teachers we are to this day **trained** to employ through the National Literacy Strategy advice! She states "Each one of these children reflected the NLS reading strategies when I tested them...prior to teaching:"(p.5). Note, for example, that in week one of the ELS programme whilst the children are expected only "to hear and say s, m, and t in the initial position", they are then expected "to read on sight the 45 high frequency words to be taught by the end of reception" and "to read on sight the words from texts of appropriate difficulty". Educational Psychologists' reports constantly describe children's reading failings as guessing words from their shape, the picture clue or the initial letter and yet **instructions to teach reading by these flawed methods persist in the National Literacy Strategy despite the documented evidence that the children are frequently handicapped by them in the longer term.** Professor Diane McGuinness, in contrast, lists as the very first point in her prototype of how to teach the English alphabet code 'NO SIGHT WORDS' (p.21), and throughout the RRF newsletters the dangers of learning words as wholes and guessing from initial letters, picture and context cues are stressed over and again and evidenced by research.*

*What a tragic and ironic twist of fate that those who have been charged with writing the National Literacy Strategy advice have misunderstood the research on reading instruction or brought their own beliefs to the fore. The National Literacy Strategy remains the greatest opportunity to get reading instruction right, but this can only happen with honest examination of the research alongside classroom findings and open comparison between approaches and programmes. The notorious reading debate has necessarily manifested itself in this new century. Politics, subjectivity and bias have taken precedence over scientific testing and mounting evidence of the most effective reading instruction. The NLS Early Literacy Support early intervention programme is symptomatic of the lack of professionalism and accountability which is endemic at the highest levels. In this day and age it is inexplicable that a major national and expensive initiative has been piloted on a vast scale, but without pre and post standardised testing and without control and comparison groups. And all this after decades of debate so heated that it is referred to as the 'reading wars'. Have no lessons been learnt from the history of misguided fads and philosophies in reading instruction? Diane McGuinness refers to this history and the way forward in her fascinating article (p.17). Bonnie MacMillan's evaluation of the ELS programme should be the catalyst for an immediate national inquiry and the RRF will be making yet another approach to the Education and Skills Select Committee to this end.*

*A large percentage of children are still failing to learn to read, or to read well, and this cannot be blamed on the backgrounds or 'special educational needs' of the children. Whilst the RRF recognises the need to change the National Literacy Strategy's advice on reading instruction because of its massive impact and influence, nevertheless the schools and teachers **could choose to change overnight** and we could quite simply leave the NLS advice for reading instruction behind. The DfES has reminded the Reading Reform Foundation that the National Literacy Strategy is non-statutory, and so I pass on that reminder to the teaching profession. 'Non-statutory', however, should not equate to 'unaccountable' considering the clout of the delivery of the non-scientific NLS as a virtual monopoly via the LEAs.*

*We welcome five new members to our RRF committee. This very special issue of our newsletter includes contributions from four of those new members. I shall make no comments after their articles as their contributions and credentials speak for themselves. Please do let us know how you get on with any new approaches or programmes, do measure the outcomes, and don't hesitate to contact the RRF if you would like advice or just a chat. Good luck and best wishes.*

Debbie Hepplewhite

# Why are so many of our children failing to learn to read? If the NLS is flawed what can we do about it?

A personal response to Debbie Hepplewhite's 'An evaluation of the NLS from a teacher's perspective' from the RRF Newsletter No. 48 April 2002 – by Fiona Nevola

## A teaching history

I need to begin my response to this important article at a personal level. I have no axe to grind other than that we, as teachers, *must* be open to the new methodologies and teaching tools that are now available to us, and through us, to the children we teach. We are only teachers because we want to teach. We are not teachers so that we can watch children fail. If a teaching tool is not working then we must stop using it. We must also stop blaming the children for having 'learning difficulties'. It is time to turn the spotlight - the searchlight - on our own teaching difficulties.

For twenty-five years I have been a class teacher, teaching at KS2 and KS3. I was Head of English in two schools over a period of fourteen years. I was therefore responsible for the literacy attainments of the children within the school. By the word 'literacy' I mean very simply the ability to read fluently and to understand the text, and to write accurately using the accepted English spelling. I have *never* taught a whole class who had consistently high literacy standards. In every class I taught there were children who struggled with literacy tasks, be they reading, writing or understanding the text. Some of these children were removed from my classes for what was called 'remedial' help. They were children with 'special needs'.

I have had a life long interest in children with 'special needs' for two reasons: the **first** is because this concept has touched my family personally. I have two children of my own, both boys. The elder by twenty-three months could read fluently by the age of 5 whilst the younger was not really reading or writing accurately at age 9. He was still struggling at age 11 despite (by this time) at least five years of extra help. My son is now 29. He began to make real strides after he passed his GCSE exams. He went on to 'A' level achieving two A grades and then to London university where he studied for a BA and then a Masters degree. When he was 11 he was assessed by an Educational Psychologist with these letters after his name: BSc, PGCE, DipEdPsy, ADPS. This Educational Psychologist wrote in 1983: "*since F is not an academic high flier, he would be wrongly placed in a school where the majority of pupils were heading for 'A' levels and university; a wider range of ability would be advisable, as would plenty of opportunity to explore outlets other than the academic*". I have not forgiven this man's report. Nor did I remotely believe it. My son continued to have help for the years running up to GCSE. He was known as 'dyslexic'. The reason he was not 'an academic high flier' was that he had not mastered the basic skills of reading fluently and writing accurately. It also seemed that nobody could help him to access these skills - even if they had many letters after their name.

The **second** reason is that on my first teaching practice in a small Sussex primary school I met a 9 year old who was evidently gifted: amongst other talents, which included both art and maths, he wrote the most marvellous poetry and stories: but his spelling was on the same level as my son's; he wrote phonetically, but he could not access the correct English spellings. Later, I inherited him as my pupil as my first teaching post was in this same school. I set out to help him; I could not. I did not have the knowledge or the tools - despite a four-year BEd Honours degree. He was my first challenge. He and my son set the scene. I have spent the rest of my teaching career trying literally everything there was to help children to read and spell more accurately. I have had a limited success. Until now.

## The present situation

A few months ago I read a lengthy report on a child aged 7 years 8 months. This child was assessed as dyslexic and dyspraxic: he clearly is both - however this was written of him: "*This is a profound difficulty that will markedly impair J's effective attainment of literacy*". I read this report *after* I had taught J to read. In 12 lessons spread between 11.09.01 and 28.01.02 (September to January) J had moved from a Reading Age of 5:5 to a Reading Age of 9:2 on the *NFER Nelson Individual Reading Analysis* test. This is a typical increase in the reading

scores of the children I teach - but J is a child that has particularly 'profound difficulties'. At school, his LSA makes plasticine dinosaurs with him. She does not know how to help him; she is undermining his confidence to a considerable degree.

I would like to quote one more Consultant Psychologist who wrote another long and detailed report on one of my pupils and concluded: "*It is quite normal for a child to struggle with skills such as reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic in the first years of school, however after this period, she should attain a basic level of competence. If the child continues to struggle beyond this period, she may have a specific learning difficulty*".

I do not want to comment on this extraordinary conclusion other than to say that there is *no need whatsoever* for our children to struggle and to suffer in this way. There is no need for us to have within our school population 20% of 7 year olds who cannot read. There is no need for us to have over 25% of 11 year olds who have insufficient reading and writing skills to access a secondary school curriculum. There is no need for us to have our prisons full of young and not so young inmates who cannot read. It is said that 3 out of 4 prisoners have insufficient literacy skills.

There is no need for this level of human failure at all. We are, as a profession, caught in the mindset that a certain proportion of children will fail and that there is little we can do with them. A ten year old girl, born with hydrocephalus, who was receiving ten hours of special support *a week* at school and was still only reading CVC words such as 'cat' and 'pin', came to me at the end of August 2000. After 18 one hour lessons she had a reading age of 7:10 and a further 6 lessons later her reading age had reached 8:9 and her comprehension level 10.9.

*There is a sound methodology out there that teaches everyone to read - it is just not being used.*

The extraordinary mish-mash of mixed methods put forward by the NLS and commented on by Debbie Hepplewhite is what is now swamping our schools instead of a simple, straightforward, logical method, imbued above all with common sense and an understanding of how our language is put together.

Our written language is not as straightforward as, for example, Italian, but it *is* made up of a sound to symbol code. The code is complex due to its history. This history has incorporated the spellings of different influences.

So, for example, the sound 'a-e' can have many different spellings: d **ay**, r **ai** n, s t r **ai**gh t, s t **ea** k, th **ey** etc.

The letters **ea** in steak can also represent the 'ee' sound in m **ea** t and the 'e' in b r **ea** d.

Children will benefit enormously if they *understand* these ideas. However, there are just *two* fundamental aspects to reading our code: **decoding** (an understanding that each symbol in a word represents a spoken sound and the ability to **blend** these sounds into whole words) **and comprehension**. Good decoding is fundamental to good comprehension and depends on the use of synthesising phonics (blending sounds). Children, or *non* readers of any age, need to understand how our English code works and to be shown the skills to access it *-that's all*.

## The answer

Why am I so convinced we have the answer to the question, 'Why are so many of our children failing to read?' I am convinced, quite simply, because I am teaching them to read and to spell and so are my colleagues. We are also teaching them to read fast. Children do not have *time* to fail. It costs them their place in society.

In the summer of 1998 I heard Professor Diane McGuinness (author of *Why Children Can't Read*) and Carmen McGuinness (co-author with her husband Geoffrey McGuinness of *Reading Reflex, the Foolproof Phono-Graphix Method for Teaching your Child to Read*) speak at Westminster Hall. I knew that *at last* I was hearing some sense. The only alarming part of their thesis was that it was *so simple*. Why wasn't this already the accepted way to teach reading? If they were right, why were we so bogged down in complicated rules about our language? Why had my son, amongst millions of others, had up to *ten years* of help with his dyslexia?

I trained in the method in October 1998 with the McGuinnesses and a year later was co-training in Oxford with Sue Derrington and Susan Case on the first Five day Certification Course to be held in England by English

trainers. Sue and I train teachers on the Certification course for Bristol LEA, for Lewisham and Camden in London and Susan, along with John Walker, has trained over 250 teachers for the Wigan Borough. I train with Mary Sturges in Sunderland and have been known to go as far as Morpeth, Newcastle and Manchester for *one* day inset days - so important do I consider this method to be. The results coming out of the KS1 classrooms speak for themselves.

Since May 1999, in Oxford, I have taught somewhere in the region of 80 children between the ages of 5 and 13 who have reading and spelling difficulties. These children come from Oxfordshire primary schools and a few independent prep schools.

Here are just a few typical results of children who have had 12 lessons using the *Phono-Graphix* (P-G literally stands for 'sound picture') method; the children had approximately one lesson a week and were supported in between lessons by a parent who sat in on the lessons. Every one of them was already receiving 'special needs' help for 'learning difficulties' at school, but progress had not been made. **Each one of these children reflected the NLS reading strategies** when I tested them on the *NFER-Nelson Individual Reading Analysis* or the *NFER New Reading Analysis* prior to teaching: but I did not realise this until months, even years later. Debbie's article has provoked me into sharing my findings. **They are not unusual: teachers up and down the country are finding the same.**

*When are we going to start to consider that it may be the teachers who have not been given the right tools to teach with and therefore have teaching difficulties?*

### 10 'cases'- reading and comprehension ages pre and post teaching

JN age 7:6	02.02.00 19.04.00	RA 4:9 - 6:4 Comp 5:4 - 8:1 ( <i>New Reading Analysis</i> ) RA 7:6 - 9:0 Comp 6:10 - 9:7
NaO age 11:1	20.03.00 16.06.00	RA 6:10 - 7:11 Comp 6:6 - 8:3 ( <i>New Reading Analysis</i> ) RA 9:8 - 10:9 Comp 10:5 - 12:2
*HC age 7:9	02.10.00 19.12.00	RA 5:3 Comp <i>no score</i> ( <i>Individual Reading Analysis</i> ) RA 9:9 Comp 10:9
CD age 12:6	04.11.00 04.12.00 10.02.01 10.02.01	RA 10:11 - 12:1 Comp 10:7 - 12:4 ( <i>New Reading Analysis</i> ) Spelling age 10:8 ( <i>Vernon</i> ) RA 11:2 - 12:3 Comp 11:3 - 12:10 Spelling age 14:2 <i>C came primarily for help with spelling</i>
TM age 6:0	13.12.00 10.04.01	RA 5:0 Comp <i>no score</i> ( <i>Individual Reading Analysis</i> ) RA 9:3 Comp 10:9
JT age 8:11	01.02.01 18.07.01 31.10.01	RA 6:5 - 7:7 Comp 6:2 - 7:11 ( <i>New Reading Analysis</i> ) RA 8:9 - 9:10 Comp 8:1 - 9:10 = <b>16</b> lessons RA 9:4 - 10:5 Comp 9:4 - 11:1 <i>re-tested</i>
*JWA age 7:0	15.03.01 17.07.01	RA 5:6 Comp 6:9 ( <i>Individual Reading Analysis</i> ) RA 9:9 Comp 10:10 <b>8</b> lessons
*V.L age 7:0	04.01.02 16.05.02	RA 5:0 Comp <i>no score</i> ( <i>Individual Reading Analysis</i> ) RA 9:5 Comp 9:8
*N.O age 8:4	03.11.01 27.03.02	RA <i>no score</i> Comp 5:10 - 7:7 ( <i>New Reading Analysis</i> ) RA 8:2 - 9:3 Comp 7:3 - 9:0 <b>16</b> lessons

J.V age 9:6      28.09.01      RA 7:8 - 8:10 Comp 7:9 - 9:6 (*New Reading Analysis*)  
                         30.04.02      RA 9:1 - 10:1 Comp 8:7 - 10:2

10 children = 4 girls + 6 boys

#### **4 case studies looking at *reading strategies* before and after tuition (minimal lesson detail included)**

##### **1)\*HC age 7:9**

02.10.00      RA 5:3 Comp *no score* (*Individual Reading Analysis*)  
19.12.00      RA 9:9 Comp 10:9  
Blending                                      14/15  
Segmenting                                    63/63  
Auditory processing                        2/10  
Code knowledge                              24/50 = 48%

Harry had basic code on board, which means he knew the one sound - one symbol 'a' 'b' etc; he knew 'sh' but not 'ck' or 'ch'; he gave 'p' for the 'qu' in queen; he did not know the 'oo' in 'moon' or the 'ee' in 'sweet'. Harry's main reading strategy was whole word recognition: he could read the word 'house' and 'come'; he could not read 'out' or 'ship'. Harry read 'put' for 'Pat' and 'dack' for 'dock'. Harry read 2 passages from the test and one line from the third passage. He refused to go on; he was pinched, withdrawn and bewildered.

In the first lesson Harry was taken back to the beginning to read words such as 'cat' and 'frog'; from there the 'nature' of the code was progressively taught to him; each lesson he could access more of the code. By lesson 5 he was making amazing progress *and* he was smiling! In lesson 12, when he was also tested, he was reading the Ahlberg *Happy Families* books. His strategies had completely changed; he read all 5 passages. Passages 1 - 4 were faultless: he decoded every word except 'magician' which he read as 'manager' and then self-corrected. He was fluent and confident. In Passage 5 he self-corrected wanted/went and for 'could' he read 'couldn't' (the meaning of the passage indicated this!) The only words he made an error with were: 'owners' which he read as 'only' and 'now' which he read as 'not'. He scored 10/10 on the auditory processing task and had 43/50 = 86% of the code on board.

##### **2)\*JWA age 7.0**

15.03.01      RA 5:6 Comp 6:9  
17.07.01      RA 9:9 Comp 10:10 **8 lessons**  
Blending                                      12/15  
Segmenting                                    33/63  
Auditory processing                        3/10  
Code knowledge                              24/50 = 48%

Jamie read the first passage without difficulty. In passage 2 he read 'left' as lif/leaves/lit and 'pet' as 'pat' and then went back and read 'pee'. Was he using letter names? For the comprehension question I went back to ask him what the dog ate. Jamie replied "A pea!" The answer was a hat. His 'basic' code was not in place. He read ate as at/ter and then at/ee. In passage 3 he read 'Ken' as 'Kan' and 'put' was 'pat' (vowel sounds not in place). 'He' was 'the' (word recognition which has become muddled?) and 'drove' was 'door' (first sound cue?); further errors; off/ofs, fill/fell, out/when (more whole word recognition that has gone astray?), sink/stick (Jamie has been taught to blend consonants so he puts in extra letters when they are not there - see his segmenting score). He tried passage 4 although he was frustrated: legs/leeks, arms/armmps, son/sone as in 'bone'. Jamie was working hard to decode; he knows that will help; he is flipping sounds around; he is content with nonsense. I suggested to his mother that on this evidence Jamie might need 18 lessons, rather than the average 12.

Lesson 1: I took Jamie back to basics; lesson 2 we put ch, sh, and th into place as well as the 'variation' of c/k/ck. I noted that he was tired. Lesson 3: I taught him the variations of the sound 'o-e' and we sorted the letter 'o' into 'pot' words and 'most' words. Jamie now had the key to how the code works. The next lesson we covered vowel +e, the sound 'ow' and sorted 'cow' and 'show' words. I realised I was working with a very bright boy who was

making rapid connections. There was a two-week gap because of half term. I was amazed when in lesson 5 I found that he was reading fluently - as though there had not been a problem. What had happened? Jamie had accessed the code himself! He took *The Night the Titanic Sank*, a Dorling Kindersley level 2 reader, away with him to read. His mother insisted that I go on teaching him. I moved into multi-syllable work and special endings. When I tested him at lesson 8 he reached the ceiling of the Individual Reading Analysis test. He made 3 errors: convenient /convenent, vigorously/vigusly, and boil/bowl. He self-corrected prepare/produce, tightly/totally. (Incidentally, the test text is a recipe to cook Italian rice: is this appropriate reading material for 7 year olds?)

The important point is that the child was completely transformed; he told me reading was his best thing! His improved scores were as follows: blending 14/15; phoneme segmenting 60/63; auditory processing 7/10; code knowledge 45/50 = 90%.

### 3)\*V.L age 7:0

04.01.02	RA 5:0	Comp <i>no score</i> (NFER Individual Reading Analysis)
16.05.02	RA 9:5	Comp 9:8
Blending		4/15
Segmenting		36/63
Auditory processing		3/10
Code knowledge		24/50 = 48%

Val's poor blending and segmenting scores were an immediate cause for concern. She had glue ear at a young age and probably missed some key teaching. In the *Phono-Graphix* programme it is essential that the child *hears and identifies* each sound in a word. I knew I would have to play lots of auditory processing exercises/games with her - and show her mother how to do the same. Her code knowledge was weak: she was reasonably secure with basic code although she was prone to use letter names: *letter names do not help with reading and spelling*. Where she came unstuck was at advanced code level. The 'ch' in 'chip' she gave as 'k' for example; 'qu' in 'queen' she gave as 'p', and 'th' she gave as 't', 'ce' as in 'nice' she gave as 'x' and 'ai' in 'rain' she gave as the 'a' sound in 'pat'. She knew the 'oo' as in 'moon' and the 'ee' as in 'sweet'.

At the level of the reading test Val had trouble with the word 'has' and read 'when' as 'one' and 'sad' as 'saying'. She may be muddling sight word vocabulary (when/one - both words are part of KS1 sight word list) and she may be using the first sound 's' as a cue and guessing the rest. This became more apparent in the third passage when she could not get a word out of 'dock' or 'deck'. She read 'hid' as 'had' and then 'hided' and became lost with: *'was still there when the ship left'*. She didn't want to read anything further. Val's body language lacked confidence. She sucked her thumb and used baby talk.

I did not start advanced code with Val until the fourth lesson - at lesson 6 I made a note 'very good progress'. Lesson 7 and Val is so pleased with herself; she takes 4 books off to read: amongst them *Mouse Tales* and *Mrs Jolly's Joke Shop*. By the time she reaches lesson 12 she is reading 'chapter' books by Jacqueline Wilson and Enid Blyton. The main strategy that she now uses for reading is straightforward decoding and she self-corrects mistakes; chunkled/chuckled, shows/shoes, cloud/could.

She is another transformed child with clear confident eyes. She has grown up to match her reading. Her blending score is now 14/15, segmenting 57/63, auditory processing 9/10 and code knowledge 47/50 = 94%.

### 4)\*N.O age 8:4

RA <i>no score</i>	Comp 5:10 - 7:7	(NFER New Reading Analysis)
27.03.02	RA 8:2 - 9:3	Comp 7:3 - 9:0 <b>16</b> lessons
Blending		9/15
Segmenting		46/63
Auditory processing		2/10
Code knowledge		29/50 = 58%

Reading was a very uncomfortable exercise for Nat. He was also having behavioural problems at school. He had a 'lazy' patched eye. I used the *New Reading Analysis* test because he was older. I could not score him. He got 12 points and he needed 24 to give him a reading age between 6:5 and 7:6. Some of his errors were as follows: took/looked, lid/lide, held/he, soon/sood, black/box, wall/will, Anna/Annie and he substituted 'bathroom' for 'bedroom'. He gave up with the words 'lay', 'admire' and 'picture'.

As I taught Nat I realised that his overriding strategy was guessing and some pretty wild guessing too! He often used the first sound cue but after that the word often bore no resemblance at all to what was printed in front of him. We played endless 'Who wants to be a Millionaire?' type games to eradicate this as he owed me £100s on his winnings if he guessed a word! He also had a marked short-term memory deficit and needed a great deal of practice. Half way through the course of lessons he told his mother that he could now "see" the words at school. This literally meant that he was getting the hang of decoding a word such as 'm' 'ou' 'se' into its components. Nat was able to read 'ambition' and 'enough' and 'telephone' by the time we had had 16 lessons and his scores were as follows; blending 15/15, segmenting 63/63, auditory processing 3/10 - he is still experiencing difficulty - and code knowledge 43/50 = 86%.

A couple of weeks ago Nat rang me up. He had just read a book of 163 pages! He wanted to come and read to me. Nat glowed as he read his book. The behavioural problems have subsided and his teacher tells his mother that he is "trying hard at everything".

All these children have made progress because they have been supported in between the lessons by their parents who have understood the method. Reading is like being a good footballer or piano player: you have to practise every day.

### **The last word**

I haven't yet finished. One of my pupils, William was withdrawn from mainstream schooling and put in a special school for dyslexic children for a year. He did not make *one* month's progress during that time. The headteacher rang me up; she had a 'feeling' *Phono-Graphix* would help. Would I take William for lessons? Rather unwillingly I agreed. It was still early 'P-G teaching' days for me: if they had not been able to help, why should I? In 12 lessons William aged 9:2 moved from a reading age of 7:8 to 9:2 in the space of 8 weeks: July and August 2000.

William's reaction was one of anger. "Why haven't I been taught like that before?" The school for dyslexic children have now trained all their teachers in the *Phono-Graphix* method.

Hasan also springs to mind: Hasan, who is 10, is struggling with his reading. Since he began to read using the *Phono-Graphix* method his mother tells me that he is making progress with his weekly Arabic lesson. Why? Arabic, like English (... and Italian, Greek, French and German etc.) is a sound picture coded language. Hasan now has the skills and understanding to access *any* language that uses a sound symbol based code.

Recently I tested a little boy of nearly 6 whom I had last seen 11 months previously, in July 2001. He is Swedish and his mother was concerned about his reading. I do not usually teach very young children. I showed her the book *Reading Reflex* and how to teach the method. She used it for the summer and then her son returned to school and she, quite rightly, followed the **school's** methodology.

When I later re-tested her son he had moved *one* point on the same test - still not achieving a minimum reading age. He is still using first sound cues. He is muddling 'sight' words', he still has the b/d reversal he had last year. He sounded out 'when' as 'w' 'h' 'e' 'n' and could not make a word. I showed him with a word puzzle how to read when: 'wh' 'e' 'n'. I can *guarantee* that if I take the child in September to teach **out of school** he will be reading fluently by Christmas.

What is happening to our children? With Debbie Hepplewhite I look forward to a serious re-appraisal of the eclectic NLS and all its tagged on initiatives that are not working, or 'working' too slowly. We must all be aiming to teach **100%** of our children to read and spell. We must **clarify and simplify** the reading strategies taught in our schools. We need an effective evidence-based methodology that anyone can use. Our teachers must be given the basic principles for the successful teaching of reading for the sake of the psychological health of the nation.

Reading tests: *NFER-Nelson Individual Reading Analysis tests to within the range of 5:0 (mid-point) - 10:8 (mid-point) - it starts with easier passages.*

*NFER New Reading Analysis is within the range of 6:5 - 12:4.*

***Phono-Graphix - who needs additional literacy support? An outline of research in Bristol schools***

*Katy Dias and Lynne Juniper, Support for Learning Vol 17 No 1 (2002) NASEN 2002*

***Assessing the benefits of phonics intervention on hearing-impaired children's word reading***

*Sue Palmer, Centre for Human Communication and Deafness, University of Manchester*

*Deafness and Education International 2 (3), 2000 © Whurr Publishers Ltd.*

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## **Jolly Phonics Part 5** – by Sue Lloyd

In the last four RRF Newsletters I recalled how two ordinary classroom teachers, namely Sara Wernham and I, developed the Jolly Phonics Programme. In the last of these articles I will share the experiences that I have had with the education establishment.

The teaching ideas for Jolly Phonics came out of the classroom where we had been using a systematic, synthetic phonics programme for years. We were excited by the success of this method and wanted to share it with others, but nobody from the advisory service or higher education world was interested. It came as quite a shock to realise that we have an education system that allows new methods to be introduced with no proof that they work, while turning a blind eye to successful initiatives in the classroom. This same system continues to fail so many of our children, particularly those at the bottom end.

When I started teaching in the 1970s I was told that the purpose of advisers was to go into schools and listen to the problems teachers might be experiencing. They were to keep an eye open for good ideas, share these with other teachers and try to solve the problems.

Unfortunately my experience was that the advisory role turned into a conduit for passing on the latest fashionable trends. New ideas were created at the top and passed on to the advisers and training colleges. They in turn spread the ideas into the schools. I could see teachers naturally believed that the advice coming from their superiors must be good, and therefore that they should implement the new ideas. Many teachers seeking promotion also knew that they had to welcome and implement the latest initiatives if they wanted to succeed. In fact, far from being interested in our methods, the advisers wanted us to change to their initiatives, which have now been discredited.

It seems to me that, in England, we have an excellent system for promoting new methods of teaching, yet no one seems to have thought that these new ideas should be scientifically tested before being promoted. Clearly this can be a harmful system if the ideas are faulty. History has sadly proven this to be the case with several poor methods promoted in this way.

We had seen the effects of the first fashionable trend and wrong method, 'Look and Say', which created a 'long tail of under-achievement'. This was replaced by the 'Real Book Approach' (whole language and no phonics), which finally had to be abandoned because it produced an even longer 'tail'. Together these methods have failed the poorest readers for several generations. None of these major literacy problems would have happened if a more scientific approach had been adopted, with widespread introduction only after successful testing.

Once the falling standards had been revealed in the late 1980s, a new type of phonics called 'onset and rime' was rushed in with enormous enthusiasm. This approach seemed flawed to me. I knew that young children could not cope with learning all the letter patterns (the rime part of the word), and that it was much more effective to blend the individual phonemes. I went out of my way to invite the advisers, as well as Dr. Usha Goswami (the leading academic behind the approach), to come and visit our school. They never came. Looking back on this experience has made me realise that the advisers in my area, who were promoting 'onset and rime', believed that their role was merely to spread this latest initiative, based on accepted wisdom from on high, rather than open-mindedly looking for the best possible methods. Even though that initiative was better than no phonics, it did not work and has now largely been dropped.

Things have slightly improved. Phonics is no longer completely rejected and many schools and teachers have taken advantage of this to investigate alternative teaching methods. As a result Jolly Phonics is in use in many schools. However, despite this, we are still anxious about the future of literacy teaching.

Firstly, the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) advocates a mixture of methods and strategies. These mixed methods create problems for many children. Evidence-based research clearly shows that the simpler synthetic phonics approach produces higher results and reduces the 'tail of under-achievement'. The children at our school since the 1970s have always been taught with synthetic phonics and our results have been impressive since then. For example, our 2002 end of KS 1 results are:

*Reading \*2% below Level 2 (National 16%)  
Spelling 97% level 2 or above (National 75%)*

*Writing \*2% below Level 2 (National 14%)  
Baseline quotient 87.11 (County av. 100.44)*

*\* the 2% below consisted entirely of one child who had transferred from another school to our school. It is also worth noting that the boys were better than the girls.*

Secondly, and partly owing to the NLS, even in schools where Jolly Phonics is being used it sometimes does not go beyond the introduction of letter sounds. There is often insufficient attention given to the process of blending, which in our experience is so important for achieving the higher results.

Thirdly, we do not have a culture of testing first. It is unacceptable that the NLS, Progression In Phonics, and Early Literacy Support were not scientifically tested by means of standardised reading and spelling tests before being directed into all schools.

So what needs to be done?

Undoubtedly the education system has to change further. The educationalists and advisers must become far more accountable for the ideas that they promote. I suggest that it should even become illegal to promote trends, initiatives, programmes etc. without previously measuring their effectiveness by means of standardised reading and spelling tests. No Heads or teachers should be expected to adopt new initiatives without being informed of the test results beforehand. After all, they are accountable for results and therefore need evidence that any new initiative will be better than their current practice.

Currently 16% of children are below standard at the end of Year 2. We now have enough evidence to show that it is possible to reduce this to below 1%. This can be achieved by recognising and adopting the following:

- The teaching of the mechanics of reading and writing is essential and must come first. Synthetic phonics is the fastest and most effective route to reading. It is a matter of understanding the right method and providing extra support for the weaker children.
- Once there is fluency in children's reading and writing, then all the good aspects of whole language and the NLS can be used to improve the vocabulary, comprehension, appreciation of good literature and poetry, as well as writing for many purposes.

There now needs to be a consensus in the education world, with evidence-based practices behind it all. A balanced definition that I have heard came from Professor Dale Willows, OISE, Toronto, Canada. She likened the teaching to a balanced diet. In the beginning a baby needs milk. The milk is the phonics teaching. Gradually the baby needs more nutrients in the diet and these are provided by the better whole language ideas. There have been good ideas on both sides of the so-called 'reading wars'. Now we must make sure that our children do get the right diet. It is phonics first, until the alphabetic code is fully understood and there is fluency to the reading and writing.

*Editor's comment:*

*Not all local education authorities are reluctant to investigate and promote synthetic phonics teaching and programmes. There is clearly reluctance, however, to either undertake objective comparisons of reading instruction programmes/principles in the first place, or to inform practitioners of any comparative results in a transparent manner. The National Literacy Strategy appears to be a vehicle for reading reform but indications are that it is proving to be a barrier to open evaluation and scientific testing. In some authorities the NLS advice continues to be delivered as a monopoly whereas in other authorities leading literacy teachers are encouraged to offer training in synthetic phonics programmes. It would be interesting to note the record of all education authorities.*

# The Early Literacy Support programme

by Dr. Bonnie Macmillan

The *Early Literacy Support* (ELS) programme is a recent government National Literacy Strategy initiative. An elaborate set of materials and 3-day training courses have been made available to all primary school Year 1 teachers and designated literacy teaching assistants in the country. In spite of the introduction of the *National Literacy Strategy* (NLS), followed a year later by the *NLS Progression in Phonics* materials, it appears that a good portion of children continue to experience difficulty learning how to read. Accordingly, the *NLS Early Literacy Support* programme is designed to address this problem. Teachers are now to identify such children during the first term of Year 1 so that during the second term, they can receive the 60-session ELS intervention programme. In practical terms this means that in addition to receiving Literacy Hour instruction within the classroom, children identified as at-risk are given small group instruction outside the classroom for 20 minutes a day for 12 weeks.

## Analysis of the ELS programme

In an effort to gauge how effective this new intervention programme might be, I conducted a detailed time sampling analysis of the different activities within each of the 60 sessions. The purpose was to determine how much time is allocated to activities known to be most highly correlated with learning to read. In the Sumbler and Willows study (1996), for example, it was found that over a period of six months, only two instructional activities (learning about letter shapes and letter-sounds) were related to subsequent reading and spelling success.

Examining the ELS lessons, I was able to isolate 8 different kinds of activities: 1) Shared Reading (shared guided reading of text, guessing at print from context, pictures, word length, memorising whole sentences, phrases, and words, sequencing cut-up sentences), 2) Shared Writing (group composing of text, invented spelling, practice in spelling to memorise both regularly and irregularly spelled words as wholes), 3) PA No Letters (phonological awareness training in the absence of letters or print), 4) Sound to Letter Training (all sound-to-letter activities required when spelling), 5) Letter to Sound Training (all letter-to-sound activities, sounding out letters, blending sounds together, as required for reading), 6) Letter Names (learning of letter names), 7) Letter Formation (practice writing letter shapes, but could find no evidence that letter-sound learning occurs at the same time), 8) Other (lesson introduction, lesson review, other miscellaneous activities not categorised).

The total teaching time for this programme is 1200 minutes (60 sessions x 20 minutes each). Examining each lesson plan in detail, I was able to calculate the total number of minutes that is devoted to each of the eight different types of activities, and what percentage of the total teaching time this represents. The findings are shown in Table 1 below. The greatest amount of time is spent on Shared Reading and Shared Writing type activities, the kind of activities that Sumbler and Willows discovered were completely unrelated to subsequent reading or spelling success; in the ELS lessons, these kinds of activities together take up 60% of the total teaching time. Letter to Sound training and Letter Formation, the two activities that do make a difference to subsequent literacy success according to the Sumbler and Willows research, take up less than 5% of lesson time.

**Table 1 Amount of time devoted to different activities within the ELS lessons**

Activity Type	Number of minutes out of 1200	Percentage of total teaching time
1) Shared Reading	406	34 %
2) Shared Writing	317	26 .4%
3) PA No Letters	108	10 %

4) Sound to Letter (Spelling)	141	12 %
5) Letter to Sound (Reading)	36	3 %
6) Letter Names	3	0.3 %
7) Letter Formation	21	2 %
8) Other Activities	147	12.2 %

### **The ELS programme reveals bias**

The *Progression in Phonics* (PIP) materials state that “balance is essential” in developing a range of reading strategies among pupils, both “text down” and “spellings up” (p. 2). But note that ‘balance’ in the case of the ELS programme, as shown in Table 1 above, consists of only 3% of the time being allocated to the latter ‘spellings up’ category of activities, while 97% of the time is spent on the former ‘text down’ type of activities. Yet, this blatant and wholesale bias towards text down, whole-language type activities (seen within the ELS lessons, the accompanying training video, and in the support extended towards particular commercial reading schemes) appears to be something the government has decided to overlook.

In spite of statements to the contrary, both the earlier published NLS and PIP materials contain the same overwhelming ‘text down’ bias. One might have expected that the ELS programme would provide more intensive phonics instruction to help those children failed by the NLS and the PIP initiatives. Instead, the ELS lessons simply represent an additional dose of the same inadequate whole language/shared text instruction found in the previous programmes.

### **The ELS programme reveals misunderstanding of research**

Government documents also assert that the NLS materials are based on “a detailed scrutiny of research” (PIP, p. 3), but the examination of the ELS materials here suggests that any research that has been considered has obviously been badly misunderstood.

#### ***a) Shared reading and writing activities predominate in ELS lessons***

If the ELS lessons are meant to teach children how to read, why do they concentrate (60% of the time) on whole-language, whole text driven methods of instruction that research evidence shows to be ineffective? Aside from the Sumbler and Willows study, over the last 30 to 40 years, experimental studies comparing methods of instruction have shown that those methods that rely on whole language practices such as shared reading (guessing at, and memorising whole texts) and shared writing (invented spelling, memorisation of whole words, copying print) are not effective as beginning reading methods (e.g. Evans, Shaw & Bell, 2000; Stuart, 1999; NRP, 2000).

Perhaps the government is still suffering from the popular delusion that shared reading and writing along these lines has something to do with learning how to read. One famous (and seriously flawed) study by Kenneth Goodman in 1965 has had an inordinate amount of influence in fostering this myth. Goodman found that children could read words in lists with 60 to 80% less accuracy than when the same words appeared subsequently in the context of a story. He therefore concluded that children should not be taught how to read words in isolation.

While there were a number of very serious mistakes in the way Goodman conducted this study, one important error was that Goodman did not control for the ability of his readers. He used only poor readers in his experiment and had no control group. Many researchers who repeated his experiment subsequently found that it was only younger and poorer readers who make more errors reading words out of context. Good readers are able to read well whether words appear in, or out of context. Children who know how to read make no attempt to try and use context (a comprehension strategy) as a word reading strategy.

One very important point here is that during reading, the decoding of words always takes place *before* the understanding of words, sentences or whole texts. Sophisticated eye movement and brain research [event related potential (ERP) studies] have convincingly demonstrated this. The eyes fixate on a word for about 250

milliseconds. During this time, a number of processes occur close together in time, but nevertheless, in a set sequence. The visual shape of each letter is recognised, each letter is translated into its sound equivalent, the sounds are assembled together to arrive at a mental sound equivalent for the whole word, and finally, the meaning of the word is accessed. Semantic processing occurs last (e.g. Lee, Rayner & Pollatsek, 1999; Sereno, Rayner, & Posner, 1998; Perry & Ziegler, 2002). As readers become more adept, instead of letter-by-letter symbol-to-sound translation occurring in a series, it has been shown that this process speeds up, and gradually groups of letters, common spelling patterns, and high frequency words begin to be recognised all at once, in parallel (Aghababian & Nazir, 2000; Jared, Levy & Rayner, 1999).

Pictures and guessing play no part in any of the word reading processes that occur. Nor is the use of context among the processes that occurs during an initial eye fixation. Only *after* an initial eye fixation occurs, and only on the occasions where word meaning is in doubt, do the eyes regress back over the preceding text to use context as an aid to meaning. These particular regressions constitute a *post* reading strategy that *may* occur afterwards: in effect, a *non-reading* strategy used to confirm meaning, not to extract it in the first place.

In order to become readers, children need to learn how to become very adept at the word reading processes known to occur and perform them in the correct sequence: recognising letter shapes, translating these into phonemes, blending phonemes of a word together, arriving at a mental sound equivalent of the word, and finally recognising this as an understandable word on its own (if it appears in isolation), or a word that makes sense with preceding text (if it appears in continuous text). If the aim is to teach children to read, activities that have nothing to do with word-reading processes (teaching children as in the ELS lessons to memorise text, to guess at words by looking at the pictures, a word's first or last letter, or by repeating preceding text, to arrange cut up sentences in order, or to copy and invent sentences or stories) are not surprisingly, entirely useless (demonstrated convincingly in the study by Sumbler and Willows, 1996).

#### ***b) Phonological activities in the ELS lessons***

The ELS lessons reveal that government officials have been influenced by the vast amount of phonological awareness research. But, once again, the composition of the ELS lessons reveals the extent to which they have misconstrued it. First, in spite of the bulk of research demonstrating that for the purposes of teaching children to read, phonological awareness instruction is of little or no usefulness unless it is combined with letter-sound instruction (e.g. Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Watson, 1999), 10% of ELS lesson time is wasted with this type of activity. Perplexingly, this lesson design error occurs alongside the government's assertion that phonemic instruction should be "linked to knowledge of the letter-sound correspondences" (PIP, p.3).

In fact, there is a great deal of confusion over phonological awareness research. When evaluating the research investigating the relative contribution that different skills make to reading ability, many have overlooked a major flaw inherent in much of this research. At least half of such studies have overestimated the contribution of early phoneme awareness skills to learning to read simply because the possible contribution that early letter-sound knowledge might make was not taken into account (for review, see, Macmillan, 2002b). Much evidence suggests that children do not in fact develop phoneme awareness skills until they possess quite a high level of letter-sound knowledge (Duncan & Seymour, 2000b; Johnston et al., 1996; Stuart, 1999). But confirming the typical kind of confusion that occurs when examining this research, the government officials have devised ELS lessons so that only 3% of lesson time is spent on developing letter-sound skills, while 22% of time is spent on phoneme skills (10% with no letters, and 12% involving oral segmentation with letters).

Second, while government officials acknowledge the research demonstrating that phonemic awareness (defined as the ability to segment and blend phonemes) "linked to letter-sound teaching" is "a very strong predictor of reading and spelling success" (PIP, p.3), the ELS lessons show that they have failed to properly comprehend the meaning of the term 'predictor'. Correlational studies have indeed shown that a child's early phoneme segmentation and blending skills, as well as letter-sound knowledge are *related to, or predictive of* later reading and spelling success, but such studies are only suggestive; they cannot properly establish what are the most important reading skills to teach, nor can they answer questions about how best to teach them. The only way to really establish causation, in terms of what are the most important skills and how best to teach them, is to conduct a true experimental study.

Conveniently, a large-scale research project of this kind was conducted in Scotland (Watson, 1999); but unfortunately, government officials do not appear to have recognised how extremely relevant its findings were for the purposes of designing an effective early intervention programme of instruction.

Three methods of beginning reading instruction were compared (in experiment 2): 1) whole word learning, and no letter instruction, 2) segmenting and blending instruction, but with emphasis on segmenting, whole-to-part or sound-to-letter instruction, *only involving initial sounds or letters* of words, and 3) blending and segmenting instruction, but with the emphasis on sounding and blending, part-to-whole or letter-to-sound instruction, involving *all letters or sounds* of words.

The second method of instruction is almost identical to the type of Sound to Letter (spelling) and Letter to Sound (reading) instruction that is included in the ELS lessons. Rarely do the ELS activities involve segmenting and spelling *all* the sounds, or sounding and blending *all* the letters, in sequence, from the beginning to the end of a word. And the bulk of these activities are to do with skills directly related to spelling, not reading. Yet, the results of the Scottish study showed very clearly that ten weeks of this, method two, kind of instruction did not improve reading ability, letter-sound knowledge or phoneme skills any more than did the first method, where *no letter instruction at all* was involved.

If those who designed the ELS lessons had attended to this important research, not only would they have ensured that the ELS activities involved blending and segmenting *all* letters in words, instead of focusing on initial, final and medial sounds in separate activities, they also would not have allocated such a small amount of time to this sort of instruction (only 15% of lesson time, 12% + 3 %). The Scottish study involved 20 minutes of segmenting and blending instruction per day, whereas the 15% of time ELS lessons provide translates to an average of less than 3 minutes per day.

Furthermore, they would have allocated at least equal time to developing both segmenting and blending skills. In many studies, the crucial importance of letter-to-sound (and blending) instruction has been shown (e.g. see a review of some of these, Macmillan, 2002a). The ELS lessons, however, spend just 3% of the time developing letter-to-sound and blending skills. Moreover, any tiny positive effects this kind of instruction might have on improving reading skills is likely to be cancelled out by the large amount of contradictory whole word and whole text memorisation instruction comprising a major part of these lessons. How are these children meant to realise that all the letters in a word need to be sounded out if, most of the time, they are being taught to regard words as strange configurations that have to be memorised?

## **Summary**

To summarise, Table 2 shows that most of the activities within the ELS lessons (60%) are of no direct value in terms of expecting that they will have any effect on reading skills. Activities that research evidence has shown to have no effect on learning to read include: shared reading, shared writing, phonological instruction with no letters, instruction in letter names and other activities not categorised.

In addition, research suggests that the particular kind of Sound to Letter instruction and the small amount of letter writing practice without reference to letter sounds within ELS lessons (taking up together 14 % of the time) is likely to be of little or no use in helping a child learn how to read (see Watson, 1999; and Sumbler & Willows, 1996, respectively).

Finally, only 3% of the time in these ELS lessons is spent on activities directly related to reading processes, activities that have been shown to have dramatic effects on reading skills.

**Table 2****Value of activities for learning to read and time devoted to them in the ELS lessons**

Category of Usefulness	Activities and (% Time Spent)	Percentage of Total Time Allocated to This Category
Activities that have no impact on learning to read	Shared Reading (34 %) Shared Writing (26.4 %) Other Activities (12.2 %) Letter Names (0.3 %) PA with No Letters/Print (10%)	83 %
Activities of limited value in teaching a child to read	Sound to Letter instruction (single, isolated sounds) (12 %) Letter Formation (no L-S) (2%)	14 %
Activities that have a definite impact on learning	Letter to Sound Instruction (3 %)	3 %

**Conclusion**

**In conclusion, when 97% of ELS lesson time is taken up with activities of either limited or no usefulness in terms of learning to read, I estimate the chance of the ELS intervention programme of instruction being effective in improving the reading skills of at-risk children to be close to zero.**

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### **Brief biography**

**Dr Bonnie Macmillan was educated in Victoria and Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada and in Perth, Western Australia, Australia. She has been a primary school teacher in both countries and at a Montessori School in Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. She has held lectureships in the Faculty of Education, and worked with children and adults at the Reading Clinic at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Currently a Research Fellow at the Institute of Economic Affairs in London and a Research Associate with the Department of Psychology, University of Hull, she is the author of *Why Schoolchildren Can't Read*.**

## **Research Digest**

by Jennifer Chew

**A point made in all the articles summarised below is that standardised testing is important in order to ensure that standards are being maintained.**

**Davies, J., and Brember, I., 2001. A decade of change? Monitoring reading and mathematical attainment in Year 6 over the first ten years of the Education Reform Act. *Research in Education* No. 65, May 2001.** The researchers administered a standardised reading test (the NFER Primary Reading Test) to a sample of Year 6 children each year from 1989 to 1998. After the national tests started in 1995, the researchers were able to compare the Key Stage 2 test results of the children in their sample with their NFER test results. The Key Stage 2 results suggested rising standards: the percentages of children nationally who reached Level 4 or above in 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 were 48%, 58%, 63% and 65%; the children in the research sample performed rather better, at 51%, 71%, 71% and 75%. By contrast, the Primary Reading Test results for these children showed no statistically-significant improvement: the average standard scores for the four years in question were 96.78, 98.41, 97.73 and 99.57. The researchers warn that their evidence does not support the government's claims of rising standards. **Their findings are in line with the recently-reported findings from the University of Durham.**

**Bates, C., and Nettlebeck, T., 2001. Primary school teachers' judgements of reading achievement. *Educational Psychology* Vol. 21 No. 2, May 2001.** This study was carried out in Australia. The reading accuracy and comprehension scores (Neale, 1988) from 108 school children aged 6-8 years were compared with their teachers' judgements of their reading ability. It was found that most teachers made inaccurate judgements, and, in particular, that among teachers in state schools, 'the extent of over-estimation among students with low achievement scores...was in excess of 1 year of reading age' (the picture in private schools was slightly better). The researchers point out that the implications are serious: '...it is therefore possible that those needing most help do not receive the intervention necessary to maximise their learning opportunities'. This study is yet another which highlights the need for teachers to rely on objective measurement rather than purely subjective judgement.

The final paper summarised here is unusual: it is not published in a journal but on the Internet ([www.educationnews.org](http://www.educationnews.org)), and it is an 'unsolicited letter' signed by an 'international group of researchers' (31 in all – many of them very well known).

The writers summarise evidence that 'Reading Recovery is not successful with its targeted student population, the lowest-performing students'. They note that RR's 'in-house research' often excludes the results of the weakest students and therefore presents a much healthier-looking picture than studies conducted by independent researchers. RR is also criticised for not being cost-effective, for not using standard assessment measures and for not changing 'by capitalizing on research'. Two recommendations which are of particular interest are that RR

should include ‘*explicit* instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness’ and should use ‘standardized outcome measures and continuous progress monitoring’.

## A Prototype for Teaching the English Alphabet Code

by Professor Diane McGuinness

In mid 19<sup>th</sup> century England, a new movement was underway which anchored reading instruction to the sounds of the language instead of to letters and letter patterns, the outcome of applying insights from linguistics to reading instruction. The pioneers in this new ‘linguistic-phonics’ movement were Isaac Pitman, A. J. Ellis, and Nellie Dale. Dale’s programme (1898) was particularly successful and sold well on both sides of the Atlantic. Universal education brought this important advance to a halt. Self-appointed education gurus decreed that teaching whole words ‘by sight’ would work just fine and make it easier to teach large classes from the front of the room. The century of the whole-word method was launched, and the alphabet code was soon to vanish without trace.

The ‘Look-and-say’ (flash card) method was introduced in the 1920s, and was gradually overtaken by meaning-based, whole-word programmes produced by educational publishing houses. They came to be known as Basal Readers in the US (‘basic’ and ‘comprehensive’) and Reading Schemes in the UK, and soon dominated the market across the English-speaking world. By the 1960s, it was estimated that basal readers were used in 95% of American classrooms. Meanwhile, phonics advocates were fighting a rear-guard action with no success.

In the mid-1960s, modern reading research was launched in an experiment to end all experiments. Educational psychologists Guy Bond and Robert Dykstra spearheaded an effort to determine once and for all which reading methods worked best. Their study included over 9,000 children from school districts scattered across America. Each project director was charged with comparing a phonics or language-based programme to the basal programme currently in use.

At that time, a typical basal reader lesson consisted of 30 minutes or so of vocabulary work in which the teacher explained the meaning of the ‘sight words’ for the lesson (words the children already understood). The children memorized the sight words, then read little readers with boring, repetitive texts: “*See Janet, see. Come, come, look at me. I can swing. See me, said John.*” There were occasional lessons on phonics, but these were largely incomprehensible. Children were asked questions like: “What is the short sound of O?” Sight word memorization proceeded so slowly, that children learned only 1500 words by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year. Spelling didn’t materialize until the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, and writing of any type was nowhere to be seen.

One would imagine that almost any kind of phonics program would be better than this. But when Bond and Dykstra began collating and analyzing their data, something incomprehensible happened. They reduced the data to classroom means prior to computing the statistics. There are fundamental mathematical and statistical reasons why this should not be done, but apart from this, it changed the focus of the study from a set of experiments comparing reading *methods* to experiments comparing *classrooms* (teacher’s skill perhaps?). As a result, the outcome was inconclusive. No one method was consistently better than any other on any test.

The apparent failure of this study had a profound impact on the future direction of reading instruction and research. The definitive study to end all studies seemed to show that: 1) No reading method is better than any other reading method. 2) The teacher is more important than the method. If the method doesn’t matter, there is no reason to change. If no method is better than any other, OR the ‘teacher effect’ is so powerful it obliterates the impact of a method, then no further research of this type should be funded.

A small group of educators had a different reaction. If no one method is better than any other, then why shouldn’t learning to read be enjoyable? If, as they believed, reading was simply an extension of natural language, children shouldn’t have to endure those dreadful readers when there’s so much good children’s literature around. Instead, children should learn to read ‘naturally’ by reading books written in natural language. They should learn to write by doing lots of creative writing, and while they’re at it, invent their own spelling system as they go. This new movement (whole language/real books) took the English-speaking world by storm and has the dubious honour of

being the last whole-word method of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (It also has the dubious honour of producing the highest functional illiteracy rates in the history of national testing.)

As funding for applied research dwindled, research on reading methods all but disappeared. In 2000, the National Reading Panel released a report on their review of the research on reading instruction since 1970. The review covered classroom methods, remedial methods, phoneme awareness training, plus fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. What they found was shocking. After scouring the databases, they located 1100 studies on reading instruction. The papers were carefully screened to meet basic requirements for a valid scientific study: an experimental research design, a control group, proper statistics, published in a peer review journal. *Only 38 studies met these minimal requirements*, and half of these were remedial programmes. This means that since 1970, only 20 bona fide research studies on the efficacy of beginning reading methods have been published. It's no wonder there's so little understanding about how to teach reading.

During the next thirty-five years, research funding was redirected towards a more clinical focus, and targeted to 'basic' or 'pure' research, meaning that researchers don't have to concern themselves with the applied relevance of their work. Perhaps there's a way around the missing research, and I think I have found it. In part, it has to do with going back to basics, to the history of how writing systems work, how they were designed, and how they were *supposed to be taught* at the time they were designed. In part, it has to do with reanalyzing the data from Bond and Dykstra's study to show what they really found. In part, it comes from studying the research from non-English speaking countries with an alphabetic writing system. I am tracing this journey in a new book, and I can only reveal some footprints. You will have to take my word that there is convincing proof for what I'm about to say.

## Lessons from the Past

We have a 5,000 year history on the development and design of writing systems which provides conclusive proof of the following:

1. No writing system, living or dead, was ever based on the whole word. All writing systems are sound-based systems, not meaning-based systems. This is true even though meaning and phonetic units can overlap, as they do in one-syllable words written in a syllabary writing system.
2. Humans are constitutionally incapable of memorizing more than about 2,000 word-symbol pairs. This is an *ultimate* limit, taking years of study. The Japanese have 1800 word symbols (kanji) in their basic writing system, and it takes children about 12 years to learn them. Mastering an additional 2,000 kanji is the mark of a highly educated person and can take up to a decade more of study. A good college dictionary contains 250,000 words. In short, no one can ever be a whole-word (sight word) reader.
3. It would have been impossible for early scholars to design a writing system without a thorough knowledge of the phonemes in their language. Phonemes play a major role in setting up the system. The ideas proposed by some reading researchers, that writing systems 'evolved' from word signs to syllable signs to phoneme signs because scholars were unaware of phonemes, and that children's awareness of speech sounds mimics this in development, *are false*.
4. Four (and only four) phonetic units have ever been used in the writing systems of the world. The choice of this unit is based on the phonetic and grammatical structure of a particular language. These are the syllable, the consonant-vowel unit (CV diphone), consonants alone, and phonemes (consonants+vowels).
5. *No writing system ever mixes these phonetic units*. A reading method that teaches more than one of these phonetic units is essentially teaching two or more writing systems simultaneously. This will cause enormous confusion, making it difficult to impossible for many children to learn to read.
6. A proper writing system has to be comprehensive in order to work. It should be possible to write every word, every name, and every potential new word with relative ease. Because of this, writing systems are designed rather quickly -- all of a piece.
7. Evidence from the schools that were established at the time a new writing system was designed provide important lessons about how the *authors* of the system thought it should be taught. The clearest example comes from Sumer at around 3,200 B.C., which I describe below.

This history, based on over 5000 years of evidence, shows that no whole-word method can possibly work, and no scholars ever thought that it could. No ‘eclectic’ or ‘balanced’ methods (multiple sound-units) will ever work either.

## The Prototype

At this point, I want to begin assembling what I call ‘The Prototype,’ the essentials of good reading instruction based on what we know from the past about how writing systems (in general) should be taught, and what we know from the present about how a *particular* writing system should be taught. In essence, the Prototype functions as a ‘predictor.’ If the elements that constitute the Prototype are correct, then the methods most similar to it ought to produce the best results in experimental research.

Five thousand years ago, the character and design of the lessons in Sumerian schools provided a basic formula for teaching any writing system, no matter which phonetic unit is involved.

1. The complete structure of the writing system is worked out (or thoroughly understood) before a method of instruction is developed.
2. Teach the specific sound units that are the basis for the code. Don’t teach other sound units that have nothing to do with the code.
3. Link each sound to its arbitrary, abstract symbol. These symbols constitute the code.
4. Teach the elements of the system in order from simple to complex.
5. Make the students aware that a writing system is a code and that codes are reversible (decoding/encoding) by linking writing/spelling to reading (copy-recite).
6. Design lessons to ensure that spelling and reading are connected at every level of instruction via *looking* (visual memory), *listening* (auditory memory) and *writing* (kinaesthetic memory).

It is hard to think of a better list of guidelines. Unfortunately, education practice has strayed so far from its roots that hardly any educators or classroom teachers adhere to even *one* of these principles, let alone all six.

## Why the English Alphabet Isn’t Like Any Other Alphabet.

The Sumerians had a ‘transparent’ syllabary writing system, one syllable symbol for each legal syllable in the language. The English alphabet code lacks a one-to-one correspondence between sound and symbol. We call this kind of writing system ‘opaque.’ This is due to an accident of history in which Norman French and classical Latin merged with the English vernacular, with the result that two alien spelling systems were superimposed on the original Anglo-Saxon system. *No writing reform ever took place to correct this problem.* Samuel Johnson standardized the spelling for *words* in 1755, but he did not standardize the spelling for *phonemes*. If he had, I wouldn’t be writing this paper. As a result, there are multiple ways to spell most phonemes, and multiple ways to read most letters and digraphs, and these multiple ways don’t match.

It’s difficult for us to imagine what it’s like to have a transparent (or nearly transparent) alphabet code, like those in Italy, Spain, Germany, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Teaching a transparent alphabet is incredibly easy, *because it’s transparent* how the writing system works. The sound /b/ is always spelled b, and the letter b is always decoded /b/, and so on through all the phonemes in the language. With only one spelling (or nearly) for each sound in the language, if a child can ‘sound out’ a word, he will always be able to spell it correctly. Learning this is so easy, that children start to read late (age 6 or older) and finish early, by the end of the school year. So easy, that *no country with a transparent alphabet tests reading skill by decoding accuracy.* Everybody can decode. In English-speaking countries, tests of decoding accuracy (word recognition, word attack) are *the major tests* (often the only tests) that educators and researchers rely on to measure reading skill and to define ‘dyslexia.’

Some children in countries with transparent alphabets do have reading problems, but these have to do with fluency and comprehension. Yet even this is relative. Normal readers from Salzburg were compared to normal readers from London on tests of reading accuracy and speed. Seven year-olds from Salzburg read as fast as the 9 year olds from London, making half the number of errors. The Austrian 7 year-olds had one year of reading instruction, the English 9 year-olds, four or five. Further, when the worst readers in the entire city of Salzburg (incredibly slow) were compared to ‘dyslexics’ in London (incredibly inaccurate), the Salzburg children read

comparable texts (translations of the same words) at *twice the rate* of the English-speaking children, with 7% errors. The English children not only read much slower, but also misread 40% of the words. When reading skill is so entirely tied to a particular writing system, there can be no validity to the notion that poor reading or 'dyslexia' is a property of the child, or to the mistaken belief that "there will always be poor readers." A 'poor reader' is a statistical concept, not a reality.

There is more. Phoneme awareness is highly correlated to reading skill (decoding accuracy) in English speaking countries, and considered to be the major predictor of reading acquisition. Yet phoneme awareness is completely unrelated to reading accuracy in countries with a transparent alphabet. Think about this. How can phoneme awareness be so important in English speaking countries when it doesn't matter anywhere else? It certainly isn't because we have to learn an alphabet. These other countries have alphabets too. If phoneme awareness 'deficits' are the hallmark of 'dyslexia' as many researchers claim, and the diagnosis for 'dyslexia' is poor decoding, where are all the 'dyslexics' in the countries listed above? There aren't any by this definition, though reading researchers in these countries are doing their best to create some. It is currently fashionable to call Salzburg's slow readers 'dyslexic,' even though they read *twice as fast* as English 'dyslexics,' and can decode and spell perfectly. Sweden has a 3.4% functional illiteracy rate among 16-25 year olds -- statistically equivalent to zero (this rate is around 11% in Canada and 26% in the US). Yet Sweden has an active 'dyslexia' society.

There's a lesson here. Our reading problems are largely a product of our opaque alphabet code and the way it is taught, so here's one part of the solution. As a transparent alphabet is easy to learn, why not create an '*artificial transparent alphabet*' to teach beginning readers? This would consist of the 40+ English phonemes and their most common (probable) spellings. This way young children would start off with the same advantage as their European counterparts. They could easily grasp the code nature of a writing system, and the fact that reading and spelling are reversible processes, the primary requirement of a code. This is certainly not a new idea. It was the fundamental breakthrough of Pitman, Ellis, and Dale in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their programmes embody this principle, plus a number of other insights. Unfortunately, we can never know how well they worked, because there was no way to test reading in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **On the Trail of More Clues to the Prototype**

This brings us back the study of Bond and Dykstra and their fatal mistake. I decided to reanalyze the data. With 9,000 children in the study, the data will approximate the normal curve, and the truest measure of these data will be the grand mean, or average. This allowed me to compare programmes and determine what happened. Two methods in the study used an artificial transparent alphabet and were similar to the Prototype. One was the initial teaching alphabet (i.t.a.), designed by James Pitman (Pitman's grandson), and the other was the Lippincott programme, named for its American publisher. i.t.a. uses an artificial script for a portion of English phonemes, which adds an extra processing step. Children are obliged to unlearn something and relearn it in a new way, not good pedagogical practice. Nellie Dale pointed out long ago: "Never teach anything you have to discard later." As a result, many children didn't complete the transition to normal print by the end of the school year, and this impacted test scores.

The Lippincott programme was the undisputed star in this study. The children were 6 months ahead of their basal reader counterparts *and* the other phonics programmes, *and national norms*, on nearly every test. These included word recognition, word attack, spelling, reading comprehension, and fluency. Here are the characteristics of this programme:

1. It uses an artificial transparent alphabet with a main spelling for each of the 40+ sounds in English. It introduces some alternative spellings as well.
2. Lessons are anchored in the sounds (phonemes) in the language, and reading is taught from sound to print. Children learn that the letters are symbols for the sounds in *their own speech*, and that the number of these sounds is *finite* (40). There are sound-targeting stories which feature a particular phoneme.
3. Children learn to segment and blend phonemes in words for both reading and spelling.
4. Children learn letters by *writing* them, not from looking at them or from letter tiles. They say the *sound* the letter(s) stands for as they write it (*not the letter name*).

5. Reading and spelling are integrated.

6. Reading materials are designed to correspond to the level the child has achieved.

Another revelation in my analysis was the very poor showing of the basal reader children on all types of decoding tests, including tests featuring irregularly spelled words (sight words), the very words they had been memorizing over the course of the year. Here is more evidence that no one can learn to read by memorizing words ‘by sight.’

Since this study, several research studies have added new dimensions or new elements to The Prototype. In 1966, Chall and Feldman discovered during classroom observations, that what classroom teachers *said* they did bore only a vague resemblance to what the researchers *saw* they did, and had recorded on their check lists. This is perfectly understandable. It’s hard to monitor your own behaviour. Nevertheless, this discovery showed us that the only way to measure the impact of the teacher in the classroom, and disentangle the teacher from a method, is to sit in the classroom, hour-by-hour, for weeks or months, and record what is going on. This is the only way to answer the question: is there any relationship between what the children are learning in the classroom and reading skill measured on standardized tests, and, if so, what is it?

Three large-scale studies have been carried out on this topic, beginning with Carr and Evans in Canada, in 1985. All three studies produced identical results. Very few ‘literacy’ activities for young children (ages 5 to 8) have a positive impact on reading skill. Those that do are: learning the phonemes in the language and how they are represented by letter symbols, segmenting and blending sounds in words, plus the amount of time spent writing (all types). There was some evidence that silent reading (not reading aloud, or group reading) is helpful, especially if the whole class is reading silently at the same time. As a large number of classrooms, using a variety of different methods, were observed in these studies, the consistency of the results is rather remarkable.

They discovered much more. Many literacy-type activities had no impact on reading skill (neutral), and some had a strongly negative impact, meaning that the *more time* the children spent doing that activity, the poorer their reading scores were. The strongest negative predictor was teacher-directed language arts lessons involving vocabulary training and reading stories. This was a powerful effect in all three studies, and negative correlations ranged as high as  $r = -0.80$  (1.0 is perfect). Time spent memorizing ‘sight words’ was also a strong, negative predictor. Activities that had *no impact*, positive or negative (correlations at zero), were ‘pretend reading’ or ‘group reading,’ learning ‘concepts of print’ such as print direction and how to turn pages, tasks involving letter names, time spent on larger phonetic units, such as clapping out syllable beats, and time spent on auditory phoneme awareness tasks (no letters). The message is clear: If your goal is to teach the alphabet code, then teach the alphabet code, and get on with it.

The positive impact of writing was seen in all three studies, and was something of a surprise. Experimental studies have shown that copying letters is the best way to learn them. Not only this, but copying out spelling words halves the learning rate compared to using letter tiles or a computer keyboard. There is also evidence that learning to *spell* produces higher scores on a *reading* test than the same amount of time spent learning to read, a result that confirms Montessori’s insight about the greater generality (transfer) of spelling over reading.

On the basis of these and other studies, the Prototype can be updated to be more specific. In addition to the original framework, here’s what a successful reading/spelling program for teaching the English alphabet code should adhere to:

- **NO SIGHT WORDS** (except for truly undecodable words)
- **NO LETTER NAMES**
- A sound-to-print orientation. Phonemes, not letters, are the basis for the code.
- Phonemes are finite. They provide an endpoint or ‘pivot point’ which allows an opaque writing system to reverse. Learning the ‘sounds’ of all possible spellings does not.
- Teach phonemes only and no other sound units.
- Begin with an artificial transparent alphabet: a one-to-one correspondence between 40+ phonemes and their most common spelling.

- Teach children to identify and sequence sounds in real words by segmenting and blending, *using letters*. Don't do this in the auditory mode alone.
- Teach children how to write each letter. Integrate writing into every lesson.
- Link writing (spelling) and reading to ensure children understand how the code works.
- Teach spelling alternatives (“there’s more than one way to spell this sound”) not ‘reading alternatives.’
- Spelling should be accurate or, at a minimum, phonetically accurate (all things within reason).

The final step is to introduce the entire advanced spelling code -- the 134 remaining common spellings beyond the basic code level, a process that has yet to find its way into any reading programme. This issue has received no attention from researchers so far.

### **The National Reading Panel Results**

I have constructed a fairly detailed Prototype despite the lack of direct evidence from experimental research on reading methods. The interesting question is whether the Prototype is a ‘good fit’ to the most effective programmes in the NRP database. For the most part, these studies compared a phonics-type programme to some other method, most often ‘real books’ or a well-known reading scheme. In some studies, the contrasting programme was another type of phonics, such as ‘analytic phonics,’ a method employing multiple types of phonetic units.

The studies were evaluated by the NRP using the technique of Meta-Analysis which is based on ‘effect sizes.’ An effect size is a statistical value that allows you to compare the *size of the difference* between two methods on any similar type of test in standard deviation units. A Meta-Analysis is essentially a grand average of individual effect sizes. Here’s a simple guide to interpreting an effect size. ES values around .30 or less are marginal, and probably not significant. Values above .50 start to become interesting, indicating that one method is clearly superior (significantly different). A value of 1.0 means the effect is large, equal to a one standard deviation difference between the two methods. On a standardized reading test, this would be the difference between scoring at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile (100 standard score) and the 15<sup>th</sup> (85 standard score). Effect sizes can go higher than this.

As noted above, the NRP located only 38 bona fide studies, and half were remedial programmes. Subtracting this group of studies, the combined effect size for reading test scores for beginning readers is .55 in favour of phonics over real books/reading schemes. This value will go higher if less successful phonics methods are excluded. For example, the average effect size for ‘rhyme-analogy’ programmes was .28.

I identified the programmes in the NRP database that were the closest fit to the Prototype and computed independent effect sizes. I also computed effect sizes for the i.t.a. and the Lippincott versus basal reader comparisons in Bond and Dykstra’s report, as this study didn’t make the NRPs 1970 cut-off. i.t.a. was not particularly successful for reasons given above. Effect sizes reflect this: word recognition (.49), phonics knowledge (.31), spelling (.11), and comprehension (.03). The Lippincott programme had a much higher success rate, with effect sizes as follows: word recognition (1.12), phonics knowledge (.62), spelling (.61), comprehension (.57). These values are the benchmark for this programme, as they’re based on over 1,000 children. Several small-scale studies using Lippincott were in the NRP database. These produced somewhat lower effect sizes, though still impressive.

Another method that fits the prototype is the Open Court programme. Only one study on Open Court appeared in the NRP database. Here is Barbara Foorman’s description of this programme:

“Components of the first grade program include: 1) Phonemic awareness activities during the first 30 lessons (10-15 minutes daily); 2) Forty-two sound/spellings are introduced in the first 100 lessons, one per day in lessons 11-30, and at a slower pace thereafter; phonics principles are reinforced through sound/spelling cards, alliterative stories, and practice stories whose vocabulary is tightly controlled for the sound/spelling just taught; 3) Blending is regarded as the key strategy for applying the alphabetic principle, and, therefore, 8-10 new words are blended daily; 4) Dictation activities move from letter cards to writing words sound by sound, to whole words (by lesson 17), to whole sentences (by lesson 27); 5) Shared reading of Big Books; 6) Text anthologies (with uncontrolled vocabulary), plus workbooks are introduced in the middle of first grade, when all sound/spellings have been introduced; and 7) Writing workshop activities are available in individual and small group formats.” (Foorman et al, 1997).

Unfortunately, this study had serious design flaws. Only the poorest readers in each class were tested. These children also received 2½ hour of tutorials each week in which the tutorial *might* or *might not* match the classroom programme, and this was neither controlled nor accounted for. As a consequence of these and other problems, effect sizes (first two years combined) were not impressive: word recognition (.53), spelling (.37), comprehension (.34). This was not a fair evaluation of Open Court, and better research is called for.

The last programme is Jolly Phonics, developed by Sue Lloyd. The NRP included only one JP study in its database (Stuart, 1999). I have added other studies that appeared after the NRP's published report, plus a study they missed. This programme goes beyond the Prototype in many respects, and represents what can happen when popular myths about classroom instruction are challenged.

First to go was the myth that *reading is hard to teach*. Second to go was the notion that a linguistic-phonics program can't be taught to the whole class at the same time. Third to go was the age barrier. Jolly Phonics is taught to four-year olds. Fourth to go was the belief that young children can't 'pay attention' for more than about 10-15 minutes. Fifth to go was the related belief that if young children are kept at a task for longer than about 15 minutes they become bored and frustrated, and are unable to learn. Sixth to go was the idea that teachers need extensive training to teach the alphabet code properly.

Lloyd's initial goal was to reduce the lessons to the essential elements and present them at an optimum rate -- as quickly and as in-depth as possible. Undoubtedly, her greatest insight was in figuring out what these elements are. She discovered that young children forget when lessons are spaced too far apart, necessitating constant reteaching and review. It transpired that very young children can be taught to read in a whole class format if three conditions obtain: 1) The lessons are fun and stimulating, and engage all the children. 2) There are sufficient backup materials for individual work to support what is taught in the lessons. 3) Parents are involved enough to understand the programme and know how to support their child at home. When lessons are enjoyable; when children see that they and their classmates are actually learning to read, they have no trouble paying attention for more than 15 minutes.

Lloyd found ingenious ways to engage the whole class and keep them on task. She invented simple action patterns to represent each phoneme. Children say each phoneme aloud accompanied by the appropriate action. Apart from being fun for the children, the action patterns fulfil a number of functions. They help anchor the speech sounds in memory. Because the actions are *visible* to everyone, including the teacher, they ensure that all children are engaged (no daydreamers allowed). In this sense, they function as gentle 'peer support' for everyone to get on board and learn quickly. Of course, it is possible that these actions aren't essential to the success of the programme. Research is needed to sort this out.

Jolly Phonics proceeds rapidly. Children learn about one phoneme per day, along with the accompanying actions, and their letter symbols. They get handwriting training almost from the beginning, and are soon able to write simple words made up of the phonemes taught so far. The basic 'transparent alphabet' is taught in 11 to 12 weeks, about 60 hours of direct instruction. After this, children move on to simple 'phonics' books, and learn spelling alternatives (21 spellings alternatives are taught). Little teacher training is necessary. There is a handbook with brief, clear instructions, and an excellent video.

None of the JP studies were exactly alike (a problem with all this research). The study truest to Lloyd's intentions was the study by Johnston and Watson (1997) which was carried out at Lloyd's school. The children were matched on a wide range of skills (IQ, phoneme awareness, etc.) to a control group in Scotland who were taught 'analytic phonics,' the traditional Scottish method. The effect sizes for reading were strong in favour of JP: .90 on the British Ability Scales immediately after training, 1.0 at a one year follow up, and 1.10 a year after that, showing the lasting impact of the programme.

Stuart's famous 'Dockland's study was carried out in an impoverished area of London's East End. The children arrive at school with little or no spoken English (53% of children in this study knew *no* English words). Stuart followed the JP format closely, and children had about 60 hours of instruction. The comparison group was from a

similar school that was using real books. Despite the fact that these children had such poor English language skills, results were much the same as Johnston and Watson's, and held up well over time.

At the first post-test, when the children were 5½ years old, the effect sizes were: BAS reading (1.2), Young reading (.63), nonword decoding (1.5), Willows spelling (1.4). At the second post-test, one year later, these values were respectively, .71, .62, .74, .86. These children scored well above national norms in reading and spelling, and made these outstanding gains despite the fact that their vocabulary scores lagged far behind British norms.

In a study by Sumbler and Willows in Toronto, the duration of the JP lessons was shortened considerably, and lessons were extended over the entire school year. These results provide scientific support for Lloyd's discovery that learning should be fast and intense for maximum effect. The problem was not in the study design, but in the reluctance of the kindergarten teachers to teach at this pace. Instead, lessons were reduced to 20 minutes or less, and total time was nearly cut in half. Sumbler and Willows are the authors of one of the observational studies reported earlier. During these observations, they discovered that the JP lessons were intermingled with a variety of irrelevant language activities, reducing time still further. The impact of the slower delivery, plus the lack of focus, is shown by lower effect sizes on the Woodcock reading tests: word recognition: .52, word attack: .68, and spelling: .44.

Johnston and Watson carried out a study using a programme designed by Watson called Fast Phonics First (FPF). It is similar to JP, but departs from it on a number of levels. The study involved all beginning readers (337) from the Clackmannanshire county in Scotland. Children in the FPF classes were more likely to be from impoverished families (more free lunches and clothing allowances). The remaining children constituted the control groups. In the FPF classes, phonemes were introduced in the same order as JP, but at a slower rate (just under 1 per day). Lessons were shorter, more spread out, and took less total time (20 minutes daily for 16 weeks, a total of 26 hours). No action patterns were used. Lessons on phoneme identification (initial, middle, final position) were taught with Lloyd's 'Finger Phonics' book. Segmenting and blending were taught with magnetic letters on a large board. Children gradually transitioned to writing over the course of the 16 weeks. No consonant blends (CCVC/CVCC words) or spelling alternatives were taught.

There were two control groups. Both received the typical Scottish 'analytic phonics' instruction, but with constraints. They learned the same letter-sound correspondences in the same order, and used the same practice words as the FPF groups, but at a much slower rate. Both control groups learned one phoneme per week (16 total) in word-initial position only. They had handwriting training from the beginning.

The first control group (Analytic ONLY) did numerous activities during the week to reinforce memorization of the letter-sound pair, including colouring and drawing activities. The second control group (Analytic + PHON) split the 20 minute time period between learning the 16 letter-sound pairs and phonological exercises (auditory only). These included onset-rime and phoneme segmenting and blending. The colouring and game-type activities were dropped.

In the comparisons between FPF and Analytic ONLY, effect sizes were large: BAS reading (.91), Schonell spelling (1.45). ES values were slightly lower in the comparison between FPF and the Analytic+ PHON group: Reading (.85); spelling (1.17). The children were retested one year later. By this time, the entire county had switched to FPF, and this eliminated the group differences in reading and comprehension. The original FPF group maintained an advantage in spelling.

It's informative to compare the UK studies where possible, as they used similar tests reported in age-equivalent scores. (Canadian researchers use different tests reported in standard scores.) I compared the JP and FPF programmes (Johnston and Watson 1997 and 2000) at post-testing when children were 5½ years old. JP children scored 16 months above national norms in BAS reading. The FPF children scored 6 months above norms in reading and spelling (Schonell). The FPF children gained over the following year (age 6½), and now scored 10 months above norms in reading, 12 months in spelling, and 6 months in comprehension. There were no data for the JP children at this age. However, at the end of third year (7½ years), JP children were 9 months ahead of norms in reading comprehension.

Unfortunately, Stuart reported the data mainly as raw scores. However, age-equivalent scores were reported for the final testing at age 6½. Recall that the children in the JP and Big Books classrooms were largely non-English speaking. For BAS reading, the JP classes were 7 months above national norms, and were 9 months ahead of the children in the Big Books classroom. On Schonell spelling, JP classes were 4 months above national norms, and 12 months ahead of controls.

It is clear that the JP training at Lloyd's school (Johnston and Watson 1997) produced much greater gains, but we don't know why. Is this a function of the speed and intensity of the instruction, a function of curriculum variations, a function of different populations, or all three? These are important questions for future research.

So far, no programme fits the Prototype in providing adequate and complete spelling instruction (mastery of the 134 additional common spellings for English phonemes and Latin suffixes). Despite this, the JP spelling scores were surprisingly high, certainly much higher than national norms. As norms are based on the current status quo, this shows us what a parlous state spelling instruction is in. Merely teaching the code the right way around, getting the logic straight, and adding 20 or so of the 134 spelling alternatives that need to be taught, makes an enormous difference.

The three UK studies also measured phoneme awareness, revealing an enormous impact of the JP and the FPF programme on segmenting skills. The overall average ES value was 1.65. Johnston and Watson found that the impact of FPF was far greater than isolated phonological awareness training (the AP + PHON group). In this comparison, the effect size was .73 in favour of FPF.

This is a serious (fatal) blow to the advocates of supplemental phonological awareness programmes. And this is supported by the findings of the NRP in their survey of phoneme awareness training studies. The NRP located nearly 2,000 studies on 'phoneme awareness.' Only 52 studies passed the basic screening. They looked at several contrasts, with important results. Training phonological larger units has no impact on reading or spelling skills. Phoneme awareness training in the auditory mode only (no letters) is not much better (effect sizes around .35). If reading and spelling are measured by standardized tests, which is *rarely the case* in these studies, the effect sizes are similarly low. Of the studies I could locate which did use standardized reading and spelling tests, the impact of phoneme awareness training on reading was negligible (ES values ranging from .30 to .40).

More surprising, phoneme awareness training didn't impact *phoneme awareness* skill any better than a good linguistic-phonics programme. The average effect size of phoneme awareness training on phoneme awareness was .85 across all studies. After subtracting the weaker studies from the database (remedial studies, foreign language, brief duration, small sample size, etc.), this value didn't increase by much (ES = 1.10). This isn't close to 1.65 (JP + FPF).

This is unassailable evidence that a phoneme awareness training component (even a good one) provides no extra advantage over a good linguistic-phonics programme. Here's the message: If phoneme analysis/synthesis is integrated into reading and spelling lessons from the outset, this has a much greater impact on phoneme awareness skill than if phoneme awareness is taught in isolation.

I realize that, for some readers, I'm not telling you anything you didn't already know. What I have tried to do is put this 'knowing' into a wider frame, one that comes as close as possible to being scientifically and logically unassailable. Due to the fact that reading instruction has gone so far awry, and spelling instruction hasn't even begun (there's virtually no research on spelling instruction, and no section on 'spelling' in the NRP report), there's a long, hard battle ahead, and we may not win it. We certainly won't win it if we don't understand precisely why some methods work and some do not.

### **Brief Biography**

**Diane McGuinness is emeritus Professor of Psychology, University of South Florida. She has conducted research on perceptual and cognitive development and on reading instruction and remediation. She has published over 100 research papers, theoretical papers, chapters, and books on these and other topics. She received her undergraduate and graduate degrees in psychology at the University of London: B.Sc. at Birkbeck College (first class honours) and Ph.D at University College.**

## **rml - Ruth Miskin's new literacy programmes** by Ruth Miskin

I have taught for 25 years, 14 years as a headteacher. During all this time, however, my real interest and passion was the search for efficient and effective ways of getting children to read and write. We all know that as soon as children develop fluency the more they read, the more they want to read and the better they get at reading. They read texts in other lessons and, importantly, read books at home for themselves. This was particularly important in my last school where parents could not read English.

Unfortunately, the task of teaching reading was made very difficult: not because the children had any difficulty in learning grapheme-phoneme correspondences, or phoneme-blending to read words (they learned this very quickly), but because we had few appropriate texts for the children to read for themselves. By this I mean simple decodable texts that encourage word-reading-by-phoneme-blending. I wanted children to read texts, *every day*, that included first the 26 letters and a simple sound for each, then advancing to 44 grapheme-phoneme correspondences, then to 80+.

I looked for texts that included a gradual build up of this knowledge, that were lively and fun (this has often been a problem with phonic books) and lastly I needed them to be very cheap so that every child could have a copy to keep and practise at home. I did not find any that met all these criteria.

We had plenty of lovely books that we could read *to* children. We had Oxford Reading Tree and a plethora of other schemes for children to 'read' for themselves. However, these texts encourage guessing, the use of picture and context cues and the need for many words to be taught beforehand by 'look-and-say'. They also encourage comprehension to be used as an aid to decoding rather than the other way round.

I left my school nearly two years ago and supported other schools to help their children learn to read. The more I saw of other schools the more I realized that this predicament is nationwide and urgently needed addressing.

So I decided to write two literacy programmes: one for older children who have failed to read for seven years at primary school and another for children beginning reading.

I found an excellent writer who could write texts with a good story-line, at the same time as building up the grapheme-phoneme correspondences step-by-step. (After trying to write phonically regular texts myself, I know how difficult this task is.)

### **rml 1 programme**

rml 1 is designed for children in Year 1 and for children in Years 2, 3 and 4 who cannot read confidently. The programme is also appropriate for children with special needs and EAL children.

### **rml 2 programme**

rml 2 is a reading, spelling, vocabulary and writing programme for older KS2 and KS3 children who find it hard to understand texts because they read so slowly and hesitantly.

Both rml programmes start right at the beginning with the 44 sounds of English and move to reading texts with multi-syllabic words and those with a range of suffixes and prefixes.

They aim to take children to a *decoding* age of 9+ (rml1) and 12 years (rml2). (Note that this is not a comprehension age. Children with the *potential* of attaining a high *comprehension* reading age achieve this once they have read fluently for a few years.)

The course is intensive and systematic. It uses teaching strategies that are simple and easy to use, *once* teachers have been trained.

It is based upon considerable research and three simple premises:

1. If children cannot read graphemes (letter/ letter groups) they will have difficulty in reading words.
2. If they cannot read the words easily they will be unable to read a text.
3. If they cannot read a text they will be unable to comprehend what they read.

The programme includes teaching children to:

- **Understand phoneme-grapheme correspondence**

This is taught quickly and effectively using mnemonic associations.

- **Read single and multi-syllabic words containing specific phoneme-grapheme correspondences**

Children practise reading words they will read in the forthcoming text using phoneme-grapheme knowledge.

- **Read phonically irregular words**

Children are taught to read the small number of words that do not follow a regular phonic pattern.

- **Read texts containing carefully controlled phonic and irregular vocabulary**

These are very lively texts that are written to include a range of fiction and non-fiction genres. They have been specially written to help children practise reading words they already know. Once children can ‘decode’ the text, they are then helped to re-tell, summarise and then discuss key questions about the text.

rml 1 and rml 2 have texts appropriate to younger and older children respectively. *Every* child has a copy of the text.

- **Spell words containing a gradual build up of phoneme-grapheme correspondences**

Children learn to spell very quickly using a simple system that has proved highly successful. They are also taught to spell the small number of irregular words.

- **Develop a wide range of vocabulary for writing**

Although the texts are phonically regular, a wide range of vocabulary is introduced to broaden children’s spoken and written vocabulary.

- **Write in a range of genres**

Children are helped to write independently step by step. Both teachers and children are supported with ideas, structures and writing frames.

Marking rubrics are used for assessing the quality of writing so that children have a clear idea, as they write, about their audience, purpose and the form their writing will take.

The writing generally ties in closely with the texts they read, but further support is given to teachers to develop writing in the afternoons (rml 1 only).

- **Develop a clear handwriting style**

It is vital that children develop a clear and fluent handwriting style as soon as they learn to write. Once they have mastered clear individual letter formation they are taught to join letters into a fluid script. Teachers are given step-by-step guidance.

- **Take responsibility for completing specified homework**

Children have specified homework to complete. This consists of re-reading the text and revising spelling and speed-reading exercises.

## **Literature**

Teachers introduce children to a range of literature (of their choice) alongside the rml programme. Stories, poems, non-fiction texts are read **to** children. Books are chosen with no other objective other than ‘this is a good book’. No expectation is placed upon the children to read these books for themselves before they have the necessary decoding skills. It is vital that children do not struggle as they learn to read; too many children get turned off reading because they believe it is just too hard for them. While children learn to read, teachers do what they do best: encourage children to love books. It is only when children love stories that they will want to read them for themselves.

As soon as children can read texts half way through the programmes, they are then encouraged to read familiar stories and texts for themselves at home as well as at school.

**Children’s talk**

Great emphasis is placed upon *all* children talking throughout the whole lesson; when they can talk about and explain their ideas we can be sure they understand what they have learned.

Cooperative learning is a key ingredient to the programme. Children work with a partner to practise what they have been taught. This means that all children participate during the whole lesson; there is no ‘down time’.

**Training**

Teachers, assistants and teacher-trainers are taught the principles of (a) grapheme-phoneme correspondence, (b) blending for reading and (c) segmenting for spelling. They are then taught how to teach these using quick and effective strategies. Teachers are then taught how to implement the rest of the programme.

**Support to schools**

Schools are given advice and support to implement the programme. Even good reading programmes can fail if there are not strong support systems in the school to ensure that the programme is implemented rigorously and most of all, relentlessly.

**I am piloting this programme in over 100 schools in September. If you would like to know more, e-mail me at [rthmiskin@aol.com](mailto:rthmiskin@aol.com)**

**How much do we value reading research?**

The Reading Reform Foundation has drawn attention to the misconceptions that are rife, and that have prevailed for many years, about how to teach children to read.

Everyone in the country should arguably be able not only to read, but also to understand the processes which are involved in learning to read and which take place during reading. Everyone should know the most effective and inclusive way to teach reading.

What is clear to the RRF is that even people at the highest levels do not know or understand what reading research tells us. What is also clear is that this unsatisfactory state of affairs is not being addressed by those bodies that should be officially concerned about the current flawed advice to the country on how to teach reading.

How much as a nation do we value reading research? If the DfES will not heed the research, will the teacher training establishments and the teachers themselves? And why is our National College for School Leadership not taking a more active interest? And what about the General Teaching Council - and the politicians? We need more than individuals in these fields to express their interest and their concerns. We have a collective responsibility.



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