

Newsletter no. 53 Autumn term 2004

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EDITORIAL

I have not attempted to give this issue a theme. If there *is* a theme, it is surely just the perennial RRF one of how best to teach reading and writing to young children.

Tom Burkard deals with the subject of spelling, which clearly goes hand in hand with reading. Many secondary-school teachers would surely agree with him that the emphasis on invented spelling has gone too far in primary schools. Perhaps, however, there is a happy medium: there may be RRF members who *do*, as his final paragraph suggests, allow some invented spelling at first but nevertheless find that their pupils go on to write accurately and perform very well in standardised spelling tests. Correspondence on this would be very welcome.

The article by Debbie Hepplewhite and Lesley Drake is based on many hours spent by these two stalwarts sifting through the new National Literacy Strategy 'Playing with sounds' materials. First indications were that the materials might be noticeably better than previous NLS publications – unfortunately, however, Debbie and Lesley found a good deal to criticise as they probed more deeply. Yet again we have to ask why the NLS team insists on trying to reinvent the phonics wheel when several published programmes seem to be producing better results than anything from the NLS. *Playing with Sounds* is in itself evidence that neither the original NLS materials (1998) nor *Progression in Phonics* (1999) did the phonics job particularly well. We have yet to see evidence that *Playing with Sounds* is based on more solid research evidence than its predecessors and will produce better results.

Mona McNee provides us with an interesting account of an interview with Dr Louisa Moats which was published on the internet. Dr Moats is a highly respected USA authority on the code-based teaching of reading, though her view that teaching reading to beginners is 'rocket science' may strike many UK synthetic phonics teachers as rather extreme – it is arguable that she, like a number of other reading theorists, regards certain linguistic technicalities as more relevant to teaching beginners to read than they really are.

Pauline Dixon's article tells us about the introduction of *Jolly Phonics* in some schools in India and whets our appetite for the information about results which she and Prof. Tooley expect to be available early in 2005. It is good to have Pam Corbyn's article from Australia. Teachers on the lookout for decodable texts may find it useful to investigate the Beginning Reading Instruction texts available from 3Rsplus, though as Pam's example shows, the 'ee' digraph is introduced from the start and this will not mesh in perfectly with programmes which start with sounds represented by single letters.

The next issue of the Newsletter is planned for March 2005. Articles and letters (let's have some of the latter, please!) can be snail-mailed to me at The Mount, Malt Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20 9PB, or e-mailed to jennifer@chew8.freeserve.co.uk, preferably before mid-February.

Jennifer Chew

INVENTED SPELLINGS

Tom Burkard

Those of us who understand the incredible power of synthetic phonics quite often disagree on various aspects of teaching literacy skills. Despite the overall agreement on priorities, it is still difficult to formulate a set of principles which we can all agree on. As a case in point, I take serious exception to the idea that teachers should “Tolerate invented spelling at first”.

Admittedly, the reading-disabled children that we teach have usually been using invented spellings for a long time. These spellings are normally phonetically plausible, or at least they are insofar as the ubiquitous ‘iy’ spelling of the long ‘i’ sound in ‘triy’, ‘driy’ etc. is concerned. In fact, we seldom encounter children over the age of 6 who have any difficulty hearing phonemes in words.

However, I wish I had a pound for every time I have corrected a child who chronically spells ‘thay’ for ‘they’. This has led me to wonder if there is really any point to forcing children to write their own stories ‘independently’ at such an early stage. Poor spellers almost always hate writing for the very obvious reason that they are creating concrete evidence of their incompetence. When Carole Chomsky first proposed that children could learn phonics through invented spellings, she was motivated by the desire to find a heuristic device that would eliminate the need for direct teaching. Clearly, we have found far more efficient ways of teaching phonics, so to justify the practice of making very young children express themselves in writing, we need to find other arguments.

The only ones I can think of are pretty dubious. If we believed in slavish adherence to the National Literacy Strategy, the RRF wouldn’t exist. No doubt many teachers welcome the practice because it keeps children busy and creates visible evidence of their activity, with relatively little effort or planning on the teacher’s part. If encouraging children to express themselves creatively is the objective, surely this can be achieved far more efficiently through oral work.

Learning to express oneself in writing is not easy, as anyone who has to read undergraduate essays will attest. The failure to ensure that skills are developed in a logical sequence is certainly the major reason for this. Children who have to think about how to spell words necessarily have little attention left for either the mechanics of writing – i.e., grammar, punctuation and organisation – or the content of what they are writing. We should be just as rigorous about teaching writing skills in a logical sequence as we are about teaching decoding skills. Making children write before they can spell makes no more sense than giving them books before they can decode.

Needless to say, children who have good visual memories can make the transition from invented spellings to correct spellings without difficulty, much as Carole Chomsky proposed. Children who start writing at a very early age will most likely be in this category, and there is clearly no need to thwart such spontaneous behaviour. However, when I taught at a suburban Norwich high school where pupils were, on average, slightly above average in ability, 40% of our intake of 11- and 12-year-olds were already *two or more years* behind in spelling. The feeder schools all encouraged invented spellings; many parents reported that their complaints were met with comments such as ‘We don’t worry too much about spelling as long as they can get their thoughts on paper’.

Alas, these children couldn’t even do that. Our Head of 6th Form complained that few of his students could write a coherent paragraph, let alone a decent essay. Since our feeder schools valued spontaneity

above all, it was hardly surprising that even the students who could spell simply rambled on wherever their fancies took them, with no thought given to structure or even meaning. Their essays reflected their lack of mental discipline.

But, of course, the pupils who couldn't spell seldom made it to 6th form. For them, the legacy of invented spellings was a strong aversion to putting pen to paper, and almost invariably a concomitant desire to avoid any form of education which involved writing. Until recently, subjects such as maths, PE, cookery and crafts were a welcome respite for these children. Now, of course, the practical elements of these subjects have been drastically reduced, with the balance being made up by written work. The same thing is happening in Further Education, where the ludicrous attempt to pretend that vocational courses have the same prestige as academic ones has led to trainee cooks writing essays about food hygiene, rather than learning how to select good ingredients in order to cook wholesome and tasty meals.

As a matter of policy, early years teachers should never make free writing the norm. I know this goes strongly against the grain of contemporary practice in infant schools, and I daresay that even RRF subscribers would find this a bit difficult to take. But think of it this way: with intensive phonics, children learn to read so quickly that they learn to enjoy books far sooner than children from schools where word-guessing is mistakenly encouraged as a short-cut to independent reading. By the same reasoning, children who are taught to spell before they are made to do free writing will be able to express themselves effectively in writing far sooner than those who are encouraged to use invented spellings. Considering the problems of children with weak visual memories, whose entire education can be jeopardised by this pointless practice, I sincerely hope that some RRF teachers will reconsider their writing programmes.

Tom Burkard is the Director of The Promethean Trust, a Norfolk charity which teaches parents how to help their children with intensive phonics. With his wife Hilary he wrote the *Sound Foundations* reading and spelling programmes, which have proved a great success at Barnardiston Hall Preparatory School in Suffolk. In 1999, Mr Burkard wrote a pamphlet for the Centre for Policy Studies which exposed the Government's pretence that the National Literacy Strategy was a 'return to phonics'.

SNIPPET FROM *THE SUNDAY TIMES*, 24 OCTOBER 2004

According to an article by John Humphrys, the well-known broadcaster, 'A survey of university vice-chancellors last summer revealed that 48% had had to introduce special lessons in literacy and numeracy for first-year students. Many people might think that this problem should be addressed in secondary schools, but it really goes right back to primary-school level. A new book by John Humphrys, *Lost for Words: the Mangling and Manipulation of the English Language*, has just been published by Hodder and Stoughton.

**TAKE THE LETTER SHAPES OUT OF THE WATER AND THE
WORD CARDS OUT OF THE SAND –
REVIEW OF ‘PLAYING WITH SOUNDS’: A SUPPLEMENT TO
‘PROGRESSION IN PHONICS’**

Lesley Drake and Debbie Hepplewhite

BACKGROUND

Following the criticism from Ofsted in its report *The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years 1998 – 2002* which led to the DfES phonics seminar in March 2003, the DfES published a supplement to *Progression in Phonics (PiPs)* in May 2004 – *Playing with Sounds*.

Perhaps the most important message to come from the Ofsted report was the need for professionals to be critical of aspects of guidance which were not working: ‘There are still teachers who follow the framework and guidance with too little questioning and reflection. Schools have reached the stage where they need to make the strategy work for them – and that includes being critical of things that are not effective enough’.

It is our experience that teachers *are* increasingly beginning to question the advice (or confusion of advice), having followed national guidance conscientiously only to find they have large numbers of children who still fail to read and write with competence – or at all. Some have lost faith in the literacy strategy and they are now looking for reasons for this reading failure when they have been led to believe that the NLS advice was research-based. In the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) paper for the 2003 DfES phonics seminar, the teachers were blamed for poor results: it was stated that ‘There is a tendency for some teachers to direct children away from the phonics searchlight in the first instance and only to use it as a last resort’, and that teachers did not ‘grasp the importance of applying phonics effectively in shared and guided reading’. The NLS team says that the problem lies with the implementation and not the design of the reading model, but many others believe the model and training to have contributed greatly to continued failure in reading standards. (See ‘...and the last word’ in RRF Newsletter no. 51, pp. 43-44, and read Solity’s seminar paper p. 2, pp. 17-25, pp. 29-30 – the relevant DfES link can be found at www.rrf.org.uk.)

The number of people accessing/contributing to the RRF website messageboard and the TES online early years staffroom forum about reading instruction issues has noticeably increased as teachers *do* search for answers. It is not uncommon for contributors to comment that the RRF and various individuals have taught them more about effective teaching methods than both their teacher training establishments and NLS training. Repeatedly, practitioners describe in detail what they are teaching and to whom; they describe what works and their amazement at what they are able to achieve in short periods of time with commercial phonics programmes which *are* based on research evidence.

What is also apparent is the frequent lament from these practitioners that headteachers, literacy co-ordinators and LEA school improvement advisers have not necessarily taken on board the Ofsted hierarchy’s clear message that all is not well with the NLS. There still appears to be ‘too little questioning and reflection’ at senior management level. Is there still a climate in education of toeing the line at the expense of being sensitive to, and acknowledging, the movement at grass-roots level? Individuals who have achieved good results in their own classrooms through employing research-based phonics teaching methods are often made to feel isolated, and may see all their good work undone the following year or ignored by colleagues around them. Certainly it is still largely a matter of chance whether those in authority sit up and take notice and support the teachers who are prepared to try different approaches. Solity states in his DfES seminar paper (2003), ‘Potentially the most significant step that could be taken is to give teachers greater responsibility in selecting appropriate

curricula and teaching methods...’. Teachers could then ‘make informed decisions about how best to teach in the future based on research rather than being directed, yet again, what to teach’.

PLAYING WITH SOUNDS – A SUPPLEMENT TO PROGRESSION IN PHONICS

The RRF was pleased to receive a copy of the above supplement. There have been worrying signs that the recent movement towards greater learning-through-play in the Foundation Stage and Year 1 might endanger gains made in phonics teaching. This is because some advisers and headteachers perceive phonics teaching as too ‘formal’ and developmentally inappropriate. It was initially reassuring to find that the supplement is clearly a substantial phonics-based resource. The reviewers felt that the DfES was making a strong statement that phonics teaching was wholly appropriate and here to stay in the Foundation Stage. This is very much to be welcomed, and the review was approached with a positive mindset.

The RRF received the new *Playing with Sounds* supplement only after its publication, ruling out the possibility of feedback which might have contributed to the content of the materials. It is possible, though, that feedback from others was incorporated if the post-seminar advice of Prof. Greg Brooks was followed: under the heading ‘Revisions of the NLS’, this advice included a recommendation to ‘convene a focused debate between experts to design and mount research...’ (*Sound sense: the phonics element of the National Literacy Strategy*, July 2003, p. 24). This debate may indeed have been convened and may have fed into *Playing with Sounds*, but the RRF was not invited to be part of it. We still do not know which significant researchers, programme designers and practitioners were considered to be worthy ‘experts’ to suggest/research revisions. It is frustrating that there is a lack of transparency about the ‘experts’ regarded as having the best experience and advice to offer, about the authorship of NLS materials, and about any trials which are conducted before new materials are rolled out into schools. We would again ask, as we did with *Early Literacy Support*: were any objective trials carried out of *Playing with Sounds*, and, if so, how did results compare with those of other beginner reading programmes?

OBSERVATIONS AND IMPRESSIONS

The supplement’s CD Rom provides the first four pages from the original *PiPs* manual including the model and rationale of the searchlight reading strategies. The following extract is taken from pages 1 and 2:

‘Where texts are familiar and predictable, children can often rely heavily on contextual and grammatical knowledge, paying relatively little attention to the sounds and spellings of the words. They make progress in the early stages by reading and re-reading familiar texts. Because this story language and its context are predictable, children can get by with very limited phonic strategies and quickly become over-dependent on remembering or guessing their way through the text.

However, these young readers often meet problems when faced with unfamiliar more complex texts because they have learned to be over-dependent on contextual cues as the predominant strategy for reading. As the familiarity of text diminishes, they need to rely more on their ability to decode individual words.’

We would ask: Should children be put in a position of ‘reading and re-reading familiar texts’ so that they ‘become over-dependent on remembering or guessing their way through text’? If children ‘have learned to be over-dependent on contextual cues’, might this be because they have been taught or forced to read this way? Is the ‘searchlights’ model possibly responsible for this state of affairs, and is the publication of *Playing with Sounds* a missed opportunity to examine this possibility?

The searchlights model was prominent from the very first NLS publications in 1998, and it is clear (for example from the OFSTED report *The National Literacy Strategy: The first four years 1998-*

2002) that it was widely interpreted as sanctioning non-phonetic strategies for word-identification (e.g. context use) at the expense of phonic strategies, to correspond with the individual learning styles of the beginning readers. Some attempts were made to correct this, but other advice seemed contradictory. Consider the following:

- In 1999, a year after the searchlights model was introduced, the original *PiPs* manual warned against letting children ‘get by with very limited phonic strategies’ and become ‘over-dependent on remembering or guessing their way through text’;
- In 2004, *Playing with Sounds* endorsed this warning by including the four pages from the original *PiPs* manual where it first appeared;
- Between these two dates, however, two other NLS publications, *Early Literacy Support* (2001) and *Guided Reading: Supporting transition from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2* (2003), condoned and even recommended teaching reliance on pictures, context, and initial letter-cues: for example, it was recommended that children ‘* work out an unfamiliar word based on the pictures and context of the sentence: * re-read sentence with suggested word: Does it sound right in this sentence? * cross-check suggested word by looking at initial letter: Does the word that you suggested start with this letter?’ (*Early Literacy Support*, p. 23).

The RRF continues to maintain that teachers are in reality receiving seriously contradictory advice from NLS materials: some NLS publications are *training* teachers to teach children to rely on pictures, context and initial letter cues, while others are *warning against* letting this kind of reliance develop. There should be no such contradiction – this needs addressing as a matter of urgency.

Playing with Sounds continues to emphasise pre-reading sound- and word-play activities. Whilst there may be nothing wrong with these traditional activities, practitioners should not be led to believe that they are essential pre-requisites to reading. Solity draws attention to this issue of pre-requisite skills in his paper for the DfES phonics seminar: ‘Teaching children rhyming and alliteration skills and general sound discrimination within step 1 of PiPs is highly questionable. This is similar to the activities advocated by the reading disabilities movement of the 1960s (Frostig and Marlow, 1973; Solity, 1996) and there is no evidence that these are requisite skills of learning to read.’ The *Playing with Sounds* supplement places much emphasis on rhyming activities and practitioners might well conclude that these are essential to developing reading ability when this is not the case. Macmillan cites a 1996 study by Sumblor and Willows showing that the only two activities highly correlated to subsequent reading and spelling performance were phonic activities involving print. (See RRF Newsletter No. 46, p. 13.)

Several researchers and attendees at the phonics seminar expressed their worries about the NLS instructions that children are to learn their letter names along with the letter/s-sound correspondences. Solity had the following to say in his seminar paper (2003): ‘The NLS requires beginning readers to acquire letter names as well as letter sounds. Teaching both potentially confuses children and doubles the amount of information they are required to learn. Letter names are best introduced after children have gained fluency in their application of letter sounds and can distinguish between letter names and sounds with fluency. Teaching names is a redundant skill in both early reading and spelling and takes instructional time which could more usefully be devoted to other activities’ (para. 6.7, p. 21). Later Solity states: ‘Equally it is not clear what role the authors of the NLS see for teaching letter names alongside letter sounds and this was not addressed by Brooks....The ERR demonstrates the high levels to which children from financially disadvantaged and low attaining schools can achieve in reading and spelling even though they are not taught any letter names until Year 2.’

In the new *Playing with Sounds* supplement material, it is still not clear what the NLS authors intend regarding the teaching of letter names, but an example is given of a child’s invented spelling where it looks as if the child has resorted to letter names to supply long vowel sounds for which he has not yet been taught graphemes. On pink card no.17 (post-Reception), the child writes, ‘big bilEgOt gruff’. The reviewers did not see any instructions saying that practitioners should not teach letter names at

first, despite the criticism and warnings of many experienced researchers and teaching professionals who have repeatedly suggested that many children are seriously confused by the early teaching of both names and sounds.

Throughout NLS programmes and materials, the tendency to imply or state that ‘research says’ continues to be misleading. If, indeed, there is evidence to support various suggestions, surely the DfES/NLS team should include specific references so that practitioners can investigate them further if they wish. How can we be in times where professional development is purportedly valued and necessary and yet government programmes continue to be produced without references? When the RRF has queried various claims, and has asked for specific references, none has been forthcoming. As was the case with the *Progression in Phonics* and *Early Literacy Support* programmes, the authors of the *Playing with Sounds* supplement are not mentioned and no research references are supplied. Is this acceptable?

In the introduction sections of the *Playing with Sounds* CD Rom and the manual it is stated: ‘Phonics needs the whole of the word-level time in the literacy hour’. This implies an expectation that there will still be a discrete ‘literacy hour’, but this does not correspond with the impression given by the *Playing with Sounds* cards, where activities are play-based in all areas of learning. What is the practitioner to deduce? Has whole class and group teaching been superseded by the latest ‘child-initiated’ ethos where the interpretation of teaching and learning is more individual, incidental and developmentally led? In any event, early phonics teaching may well warrant and need much more than 15 minutes a day. Moreover, the advice that handwriting should be taught outside the literacy hour is puzzling when children need to learn and rehearse their letter/s-sound correspondences through multi-sensory strategies including the kinaesthetic act of writing. They also need to be able to practise spelling not only orally but in writing. It would seem most appropriate for handwriting to be a fundamental part of phonics learning.

Reception children (Later Foundation) are to be introduced to an incomplete alphabetic code making it likely that they will invent parts themselves. Without the structure of comprehensive phonics knowledge and skills, the probability of guessing increases. The slow pace of teaching does not compare to the pace of the best-known synthetic phonics programmes and it is highly doubtful that reading and spelling results will begin to compare either. Macmillan notes with reference to Stuart’s large-scale classroom based study (1999): ‘This study demonstrated, in particular, the need for speed of learning at the beginning in order to avoid constant struggle later on, to catch up’ (RRF Newsletter no. 46, p. 14).

However, this is all speculation. How are we to discover the effects of the *Playing with Sounds* programme? If a pilot study was conducted, the results should be published. Is it possible, though, that the DfES has yet again made the unaccountable mistake of failing to test its programme before mass publication and distribution? On the basis of past form, we have to regard this as highly probable – but highly unacceptable and highly regrettable.

In the comparison which follows, the comments which we make about synthetic phonics outcomes are all supported by existing research conducted, for example, by Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson and by Marlynne Grant. By contrast, the comments which we make about *Playing with Sounds* outcomes must necessarily remain at the level of predictions because we do not know of research evidence showing that it has been successful in classroom trials. We feel that there are signs of attempts to incorporate elements from successful published programmes, but that the *Playing with Sounds* approach differs from these programmes in several important respects which may adversely affect its outcomes: for example it is slower in pace, and it focuses initially on first-last-middle sound processing (in that order) whereas successful published programmes focus from the start on the first-middle-last sound processing – the order actually needed for reading and spelling. This is what we call ‘all-through-the-word’ blending and segmenting. If there *is* research evidence showing that the precise approach used in *Playing with Sounds* has worked better than these published programmes in classroom trials, we hope that NLS or DfES officials will tell us about it.

**COMPARISON BETWEEN A SYNTHETIC PHONICS TEACHING PROGRAMME
AND THE DfES *PLAYING WITH SOUNDS* PROGRAMME**

Synthetic Phonics	NLS <i>Playing with Sounds</i>
<p>Synthetic phonics provides the necessary skills that enable the majority to read and write above their chronological age. The 20% of children who have greater difficulty with learning to read and write still have a good foundation of the basics and just need more time and input. Children are introduced to at least one spelling version of each of the 40+ sounds of the English language by the end of the first term in Reception and to the vast majority of phonic spelling variations by the end of Reception. These are revised and reinforced throughout Year 1. This fast-paced and comprehensive phonics approach is best practice according to the research on reading, including the Clackmannanshire research (Johnston and Watson) and the longitudinal study at St Michael’s Primary School, Stoke Gifford (Grant and Wainwright).</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Reception Year, Term 1:</i></p> <p>Learn letter/s-sound correspondences: a to z plus ai, ee, ie, oa, ue, er, oi, ou, or oo, ng, ar, qu, ch, sh and th – that is, at least one spelling version of the 40+ sounds of the English language. Practise writing the above letters-for-sounds with a traditional tripod pencil hold.</p> <p>NB: ai, ee, ie, oa, ue, er, oi, ou, or, oo, ar are not introduced in the <i>Playing with Sounds</i> programme until the Year 1 yellow cards 18 to 23 – a year or more later than this exemplar Synthetic Phonics programme.</p> <p>Using the above letter-sound correspondences, blend all-through-the-word for decoding 100+ regular words, and identify sounds all-through-the-spoken-words for encoding 100+ regular words.</p> <p>Learn 10-20 less regular key words. Start reading books from decodable reading schemes which correspond with the children’s level of letter/s-sound correspondence knowledge.</p>	<p>As only limited spelling versions of 31 of the 40+ sounds of English are introduced by the end of Reception, children taught by the NLS <i>Playing with Sounds</i> programme may enter Year 1 with insufficient letter/s-sound knowledge to read and write phonically. Practitioners and children may have to resort to a mixed-methods approach for reading and writing. There may still be a high percentage of children failed by this approach. Children may have to resort to guessing for reading and spelling words with such a limited introduction to letter-sound correspondences, exacerbated by the failure of the DfES to withdraw the instructions about the multi-cueing searchlights reading strategies. Practitioners may continue to teach children to guess words from pictures, context and initial letters, despite the revealing warning in the first pages of <i>Progression in Phonics</i> about the dangers of children guessing words. This may lead to continued underachievement and confusion. The research on reading does not advocate such a mixed-methods approach. Some children will fare much better than others, but the weakest may struggle.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Reception Year, Terms 1 & 2:</i></p> <p>Pale green cards 6 & 7 (described as ‘Later Foundation’ – relates to step 2 of <i>Progression in Phonics</i>): Card 6: ‘Continue a rhyming string’ Card 7: ‘Hear and say the initial sounds in words and know which letters represent some of the sounds’ Grey cards 9-14: (described as ‘Later Foundation’ relates to steps 2, 3 and 4 of <i>Progression in Phonics</i>) All grey cards are linked to Early Learning Goals as follows: ‘Hear and say initial and final sounds in words and short vowels within words; link sounds to letters; use their phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words’. Grey card 11: ‘North-South-East-West; Purpose: to identify phonemes in the initial/final/medial</p>

Result: Children understand the alphabetic code of the English language and know how to read and write simple words and a few less regular words.

Reception Year, Term 2:

Revise letter/s-sound correspondences taught so far.

Learn to recognise alternative spellings:

ay, a-e, ea, igh, y, i-e, ow, o-e, ew, u-e, oy, ir, ur.

NB: These letter/s-sound correspondences are not introduced in the *Playing with Sounds* programme until the Year 1 yellow cards 18 to 23 – two terms or more later. As long vowel sounds are not introduced until Year 1, the cumulative word bank cannot include such words as ‘he, we, me, she, see, tree, I, my’ etc, until Year 1 – see yellow card 19. The split digraph or ‘magic e’ words are not introduced until card 20, approximately halfway through Year 1. Children are surely going to encounter such words a long time before this point. Also words ending in ‘y’ do not appear until card 19, which precludes words such as ‘mummy’ and ‘happy’ in Reception.

Independently write several sentences by listening for the sounds all-through-the-word and writing letters for those sounds.

Read to parents, and at school, books from decodable reading schemes.

Learn a further 20 less regular words through a phonic approach drawing attention to the less regular part.

Know the blending technique: If the short vowel does not work, try the long one.

NB: This routine, ‘If the short vowel does not work, try the long one’, is emulated in *Playing with Sounds* but only at the very end of Year 1 on yellow card 23: ‘Tell them that good readers read the word first with one sound, then with the other...they need to try it both ways before they can decide’. This is far too late for practitioner or child.

Result: Read 10-50 small books.

Independently write news and simple stories by listening for the sounds – some less regular words being spelt correctly.

position in words and match with the appropriate grapheme’.

NB: These instructions on the grey cards are a serious missed opportunity to promote the idea of all-through-the-word phonics instead of initial, final, medial sounds. It is not until the Year 1 yellow card 18 that we read, ‘The left-to-right orientation of words and the fact that phonemes are represented in written language in the exact order in which they are spoken should also be established’. Why is this vital aspect of all-through-the-word blending and segmenting not made explicitly clear to the practitioner on the grey Later Foundation cards? Is it to be seen to ‘tie in’ with previous NLS programmes and the QCA *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*?

Reception Year, Term 3 to the end of Year One:

Practitioners may have some difficulty monitoring the teaching of letter/s-sound correspondences. Children may have some difficulty remembering the correspondences without a supportive mnemonic system. Apart from ‘Mood Sounds’ (grey card 10), the NLS authors fail to provide an effective mnemonic system. The emphasis throughout the programme is of incidental play opportunities to write and read – with an over-emphasis on spelling at the expense of blending for reading. Practitioners may find it difficult to restrict spelling opportunities to words avoiding the letter/s-sound correspondences the children have not yet learnt. Children may resort to a heavily invented code to fill in gaps in their knowledge and understanding. For example, we see on pink card 15 (Later Foundation): ‘Gran dusnt llk fish and chips, just bAk bEns’. Pink card 17: ‘troll, big bilEgOt gruff’. The assumption seems to be that the children might substitute upper-case vowels to represent long vowel sounds because spellings for long vowel sounds have not yet been taught.

Year 1:

On the Year 1 yellow card 18 we read, ‘They will have been introduced incidentally to the fact that there are different ways to represent a sound through the work with phonemes and graphemes in groups 4 and 5’. This insistence on ‘incidental’ teaching and learning is more akin to a whole language/mixed methods approach than a systematic phonics approach. Is this an attempt to be

Reception Year, Term 3:

Regularly revise all the letter/s-sound correspondences.

Learn to recognise the alternative spellings au, aw, al.

Know the principles of ‘soft c’ and ‘soft g’.

NB: Soft c and soft g are introduced at the end of Year 1 in *Playing with Sounds*.

Read books at home and at school – fluent readers start choosing their own books at their level.

Understand that there is more than one way of writing some sounds – e.g. ai, ay, a-e.

Try to choose the correct spelling for these sounds, knowing general principles where relevant – e.g. ‘ai’ cannot end a word.

Learn a further 20 less regular keywords.

Write stories, news, topics, science independently.

Spell the less regular keywords which have been taught.

Result: Children enter Year 1 with a rigorous introduction to Synthetic Phonics knowledge and skills. Most of them will have a reading and spelling age a year above their chronological age. Many of them will be able to read and write independently with the right foundations for rapid progress even if they have dyslexic tendencies or speak English as an additional language. Boys’ results compare well with those of girls and summer-born children are not disadvantaged as they tend to be in mixed-methods settings. Practitioners will have worked in partnership with most parents and children will have been provided with text level material, to read at home, which they are able to decode competently. The behaviour of most children is not adversely affected by difficulties with learning to read, as they will experience success. Settings familiar with rigorous Synthetic Phonics programmes often use them or trial their use in Early Foundation stage, so pleased are they with the reading and spelling results of the vast majority of their children, including those with a range of special needs.

If the Synthetic Phonics teaching principles are whole school policy, the children will go on to perform very well in Key Stage 2. You will have Stanovich’s ‘Matthew’s Effect’.

politically correct by emphasising the new ‘Learning Through Play’ ethos for Foundation Stage and Year 1 children?

What exposure will children have to a range of books over a protracted period with letter combinations and words which the children have not yet been taught? Will they be expected to read these books without a substantial knowledge of the alphabetic code? There is no guidance about the reading of books on the cards themselves, although information is provided at the front of the folder about a set of animated decoding cartoons and other decodable printable stories on the accompanying CD Rom. This is a welcome improvement. Unfortunately, the adult voice modelling the blending for the cartoon stories is unnaturally slow when saying the individual sounds all-through-the-words, thus giving practitioners a poor impression of the synthesising process.

Result: Reading and spelling results may not match those in settings following a rigorous Synthetic Phonics programme. A large percentage of children may not progress well on the mixed methods of learning letter names along with sounds, and the slower introduction to the alphabetic code combined with the multi-cueing searchlight reading strategies. Learning to read and write may continue to be a lottery for children as practitioners remain confused as to which phonics programmes and mnemonic systems to use, with what order of letter introduction along with which reading books. Some schools will change to *Playing with Sounds* as they wish to be following ‘official’ advice, and will believe that it is based on research evidence – implied by the introduction on the CD Rom and references to the DfES phonics seminar where research was presented. Many practitioners may not have the time or inclination to read the papers presented as a consequence of the seminar, and they will be unaware that these included serious criticisms of the NLS reading instruction programmes, the searchlight reading strategies, and the conclusions of Professor Greg Brooks.

If the searchlight reading strategies are whole school policy, a large percentage of children may fail to catch up and fail to reach their potential in literacy and other curriculum areas in Key Stage 2.

CONCLUSION

We recommend that schools consider very carefully the efficacy of the *Playing with Sounds* order and pace of introducing letter/s-sound correspondences. Research has shown that an early, fast-paced phonics introduction to reading and writing, supported by a literacy-rich environment, produces exceptional levels of performance compared to eclectic approaches. We suggest that children are excited to learn and apply the alphabetic code in its own right without the need for activities such as fishing letter shapes out of water and reading word cards buried in sand.

Lesley Drake is currently deputy head of an East London Primary school. She was a literacy consultant for the NLS from 1996-2003, but resigned on principle from this role because of the DfES failure to test the NLS intervention programmes and the failure to act on the criticisms expressed at the DfES seminar in 2003. Debbie Hepplewhite is a primary-school teacher and past editor of the RRF Newsletter.

LATEST RESULTS FROM HOLLAND HOUSE SCHOOL, EDGWARE

Holland House School, an independent primary school in Edgware, has an excellent track-record in teaching phonics, using the Butterfly scheme devised by the school principal, Mrs Irina Tyk. Since 1990, its children have had an average reading age far above chronological age as measured on the Holborn test. In the summer of 2004, Reception children had an average chronological age of 5 years 5 months and an average reading age of 9 years 0 months. The class with an average chronological age of 6 years 3 months had an average reading age of 9 years 9 months, and the class with an average age of 7 years 2 months had an average reading age of 11 years 4 months. We are grateful to Irina Tyk for allowing us to print these outstanding results, and we congratulate her, her staff and her pupils.

RESEARCH DIGEST

Jennifer Chew

Just one article is being included in this Research Digest. This is because it is a very important one for synthetic phonics and a longer summary than usual seems desirable.

Johnston, R.S. and Watson, J.E., 2004. Accelerating the development of reading, spelling and phonemic awareness skills in initial readers. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 17 (4), 327-357.

In the first of the two experiments reported in this article, Johnston and Watson contrasted three different teaching regimes. The first of these was the 'analytic phonics' approach typically used in Scottish schools, where letters and sounds are taught at the rate of one per week and attention is drawn only to correspondences at the beginnings of words. The second approach was the 'Analytic phonics + phonological awareness' approach: children were given the same analytic phonics teaching as above, but were also given 'phoneme and rime awareness training in the absence of alphabetic stimuli'; these children were 'taught to identify initial, final and middle phonemes in words' and were taught to blend and segment, though only orally (i.e. not with letters). The third group of children received 'synthetic phonics' teaching: they learnt letters and sounds more quickly than the other two groups, learnt to read simple words by sounding out letters from left to right and

blending the sounds, and learnt to spell by segmenting spoken words into phonemes and writing down letters. These programmes lasted for 16 weeks. The post-testing carried out at this point showed the synthetic phonics children to be 11 months ahead of the other two groups in reading and 9-10 months ahead in spelling. This was despite the fact that the synthetic phonics schools were the most socially disadvantaged. The children in the other two groups were then given the synthetic phonics programme. Fifteen months after this had finished, towards the end of the second year in school, all the children were retested. There was now no significant difference in reading between the children who had had the synthetic phonics programme in the first 16 weeks and those who had had it in the second 16 weeks, though some differences in spelling remained. Only 6 children out of 264 (2.2%) were reading more than a year below chronological age, and all of them were in the groups which had had other types of teaching before receiving the synthetic phonics programme. More than 100 children who were considered 'at risk' because of very poor initial phonological awareness scores were followed up, and by the end of their second year at school, the average reading and spelling ages of this group were several months above chronological age.

A second experiment was carried out, with different children, 'in order to establish whether synthetic phonics was more effective than analytic phonics merely because letter sounds were taught at an accelerated pace'. The researchers also investigated whether drawing children's attention to letter sounds in all positions in words (as distinct from just initial positions) made a difference. Three groups of beginners were given 19 training sessions over ten weeks. These sessions were in addition to the normal classroom teaching which the children received, which was of a typical Scottish analytic phonics type. All three groups worked with the same print vocabulary – that is, they read the same words, though by different strategies. The children in the first group were simply told what the words were but received no letter-sound teaching during the intervention (though of course they may have received some normal classroom teaching of this type). The second and third groups both learnt letter sounds at the rate of two per week: the second group was taught about these in only initial positions in words, but the third group learnt about them in all positions in words and practised reading words by sounding and blending. Three post-tests were carried out, one immediately after the ten-week training was completed, one a further ten weeks later, and the third at the beginning of the following school year. In all three, the synthetic phonics children outperformed the others. The fact that they did better than the children who were taught letter sounds at the same rate but had their attention drawn to them only in initial position showed that it is all-through-the-word sounding out and blending which makes the difference rather than pace of letter-sound teaching. The study is also very useful in showing that additional training in phonological and phonemic awareness 'in the absence of alphabetic stimuli' is less effective than synthetic phonics.

SNIPPETS FROM AN OFSTED REPORT

Debbie Hepplewhite has spotted some interesting comments in a report of an inspection carried out in Malmesbury Church of England Primary School in February 2004.

'The recently introduced "Jolly Phonics" programme has already made a good impact on children's reading, spelling and writing ability. ... Children can be seen and heard applying the strategies during free reading and writing activities as well as guided sessions with staff' (Para. 55).

These children's application of phonics knowledge in free and guided reading contrasts with the more general picture found by both OFSTED and the NLS team. In its report *The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years 1998-2002*, OFSTED commented on 'insufficient emphasis on teaching word- and sentence-level objectives, especially the application of phonic knowledge and skills' in guided reading (p. 11). In the paper 'Teaching phonics in the National Literacy Strategy', the NLS team made a similar comment: '...too many teachers under-emphasise the application of phonics in the teaching of continuous reading' (p. 14, underlining original). Why do synthetic phonics children apply their phonics knowledge in continuous reading more than other children do? It is surely

because synthetic phonics teaches the alphabetic code in ways which make its application in text-reading very clear, whereas the NLS does not. Why would children use sounding out and blending for word-identification in guided reading when the NLS expects them to blend only *after* words have been identified? (See Newsletter 51, p. 17).

OFSTED's report on Malmesbury School also comments: 'Many other pupils, particularly those in Years 3 to 6, are still at basic levels and are not using phonics (letter sounds) and other strategies to help themselves with their reading. This is because they have not been taught the correct strategies consistently in the past' (paras. 64-5).

The fact that the older children had 'not been not taught the correct strategies consistently in the past' implies that NLS strategies had failed these Year 3-6 children: it was surely these NLS strategies that the school had taught before it introduced *Jolly Phonics*.

BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION

Pam Corbyn

A few months ago on the 'readbygrade3' listserv (RBG3), I came across a reading programme promoted by Dick Schutz on his website 3RsPlus and promptly disregarded it as a salesman peddling yet another programme! Fortunately other listserv members developed the discussion with Dick. Like the RRF messageboard, the RBG3 board is a great place for sharing ideas, acquiring knowledge, and arguing about literacy and teaching methods, something that is often lacking in the workplace.

To cut a long story short, Dick offered RBG3 listservers a free copy of his CD 'Beginning Reading Instruction – Course 1' to try out with beginner readers, although many of the tutors on RBG3 are working with instructional casualties rather than beginners. BRI was developed at the Southwest Regional Laboratory established in 1966 by the US government to conduct large scale educational R&D (research and development). BRI was developed over five years of psychological and linguistic research and tryout of successive versions in kindergartens (= reception), and the programme seems to have impeccable evidence-based credentials.

BRI text begins with only five letter-sounds and then sequentially introduces additional letter-sounds as the instruction progresses. The first milestone is that learners can read any text composed of single-syllable, regularly spelled words (The Alphabetic Basic Code.) Building on the Basic Code foundation, the instruction goes on to teach the Advanced Code, with its multi-syllables and greater letter-sound complexity. The end result is that learners can read any text in the English language with understanding equal to their understanding of spoken English.

The text that was constructed for the readers is known as Maximally Learnable Text (MLT) and it is just that: it contains no extra words that are not yet decodable for the reader in terms of the code he has already been taught. Instructions are simple: 'Say the sounds and read the word'. The first set of BRI consists of 26 readers with a great deal of repetition. There are 47 words, none exceeding 3 phonemes, made up from 24 sounds introduced gradually. The story line is carried by the illustrations, which do not, however, give any clues to the words on the page in the way that some decodables and predictable readers do. The only strategy that works is 'Say the sounds and read the word'. Because many of the words are similar (e.g. 'sit'/'sits') children have to look very carefully inside the word.

Comprehension can be checked by asking questions. Children's fluency is increased by the frequent exposure to the same words in different contexts. Simple punctuation and use of capitals are introduced from the earliest book. Children taught using BRI were followed up at 17-18 years of age and continued to be good readers.

Several of the tutors on RBG3 have started to use BRI either as a stand-alone or in conjunction with Phonographix, depending on the age and stage of the student. The complete set of readers developed by SWRL gradually introduces the entire alphabetic code in order of its frequency of use in our language. Many children begin to deduce code for themselves once they have realised how it works. But for those children who don't, the readers continue until the last drop of code is taught.

The Placement Measuring devices helps a tutor decide how much code a student has learnt – there are 8 levels. For example, I have just assessed a Grade 5 student. Although he has a spelling age of 10+ (using the South Australian spelling test) he was unable to read the first Placement Device of BRI: he struggled with the first few lines, ergo he cannot use Basic code to blend words of this class.

I am Sam!

See me, Mat.

Mit sits in it, Sis.

Sim sees a man sit.

Ann sat on this and that.

Finding suitable reading books has always been a problem. These books are a useful addition to my tool box. The text is a cleverly-designed product that extinguishes maladaptive reading strategies (e.g. guessing) and rewards adaptive strategies (i.e. blending).

I am using the SWRL readers with all my remedial students from Grade 3-7, and they are at varying levels, regardless of age, from Set 1 to Set 7. In addition, I have two families where there are younger siblings (aged 5+) coming up, being taught the same whole language way as their older brother or sister, and of course doing all the wild guessing that it develops. It has been extremely easy to give the parents the CD for BRI-1 and have them print off the books. Then I have guided them through the process of teaching their younger child to read. That has to be better than having another instructional casualty 2 years down the track, and it doesn't take a lot of my time explaining how to teach reading.

The story of how this programme was developed, how it suffered a demise, and how it has very recently surfaced, reflects much of the mess that surrounds the teaching of reading over the last 40 years. For those whose appetite to learn more has been whetted, BRI tutors now have a Yahoo listserv:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Beginning-Reading-Instruction/>

Distribution of the programme is currently complicated, but will be simplified within the next few months. The listserv is the best source for tracking BRI status (<http://www.3rsplus.com/>).

Pam Corbyn is a part-time primary teacher in Western Australia, who does private reading tuition and is a volunteer in an Adult Literacy programme.

TEACHING TEACHERS TO TEACH READING: ROCKET SCIENCE?

Mona McNee

In November 2003, David Boulton, co-producer and creator of a project called 'Children of the Code', had two telephone conversations with Dr Louisa Moats, who 'specializes in the implementation of schoolwide interventions for improving literacy'. These conversations were then published on the internet. David Boulton and Louisa Moats are based in the USA, and the Children of the Code project was undertaken with a view to programmes being broadcast on national television there, starting in September 2004. It is planned to issue a companion book and DVD series early in 2005.

Both Mr Boulton and Dr Moats are very much aware of the flaws in the current teaching of reading and of the cost of such flawed teaching. What drives Dr Moats? 'It is the whole realization of the difference between what is and what could be for kids' lives, and then on the other end of things, seeing at every level what is not happening that could happen to prepare teachers to address the needs of so many individuals who could benefit from informed instruction and who don't get it because our whole educational system from start to finish is simply not set up to ensure that people do learn to read'.

David Boulton said that he had 'recently interviewed a leader of a reading organization and was flabbergasted at the suggestion that the problem was not really about children learning their way through the code, that children should be relying on other kinds of guessing strategies. My jaw dropped' – yet he and Dr Moats agree that that is the most commonly held belief. Mr Boulton said that 'According to Reid Lyon and James Wendorf, 95% of the children that are struggling with reading are instructional casualties'.

Mr Boulton says that reading failure is 'costing us [the USA] more than all the wars we are engaged in, combined'. He knows that 'there's almost an actual active inertia resistance on the part of the entrenched systems', and both he and Dr Moats are passionate about this and the extent of the failure and its origin.

Dr Moats has spent most of the last 40 years in academia. She worked for four years with schools in Washington DC, but has spent a lot of time outside schools and is currently working on the training of teachers. Having spent so much time at higher levels of study, she is aware of a 'whole repertoire of behaviours involved in teaching that are very easy to mess up'. She feels that once teachers are on the right track, 'for the good ones who really get good at this, it takes several years or more. That is what I mean by rocket science'. This would mean 'study of linguistics, reading psychology and cognitive psychology, which would include simple and complex syntax, phonemes and phonology and orthography'. She has found many teachers who confuse sounds and letters, who would say that in the word 'know' there are four sounds, instead of two, the same as in 'no'. She is now also working in schools. Even now, is she working with strugglers? I think that a year or two of teaching real beginners would help Moats to simplify her ideas for everyday work with infants.

We ought to learn to read as infants, and at that level it need not be rocket science. Indeed, the simpler the better. Teachers need little or no training, once they walk away from Goodman and the idea that reading is a 'psycholinguistic guessing-game'. Many parents have taught their children with no training at all. It is noteworthy that Moats speaks always of speech-sound processing, in contrast to David Boulton who speaks (as I do) of letter-sound relationships and 'processing this code into...speech'. Because the written code was invented to represent spoken words, and the spoken words came first, Moats thinks you should start with sounds and how to spell them. I would like her

to find a few schools that teach the other way round (letters and how to sound them out – decoding) and then compare the results objectively.

Moats writes, of trainee-teachers, ‘If you don’t understand language processing and code acquisition, then you’re going to be easy prey for people who come along with whole language theories because they seem to make intuitive sense and you won’t really know why they don’t make sense’. Many of us share her belief that student teachers have been beguiled by plausible ideas because they lack the solid facts to refute them.

There is some discussion of basic and proficient reading. I would like some definition of these terms: e.g. the level (perhaps of reading age) at which children move on from basic to proficient. We would all agree that phonics is necessary but not sufficient for real proficiency. Surely, though, students who are training to teach infants would benefit from being led into teaching reading in simple terms, so that they know that the full complexity comes only later, at the ‘proficient’ level. Moats has written many articles and books. Perhaps I would have to look there for data on the Improvement Ratio she expects when working with strugglers, and her estimation of how far below potential the average child is in America after one or two school years.

Several times during the interview, David Boulton raises the point that it is one thing for adults to see the logic in the English alphabetic code once they have progressed to understanding such things as etymology and morphology, but it is quite another thing for the beginner or the struggler to find a way into the system. He uses the vivid and down-to-earth image of an ‘on-ramp’*, evoking the idea of a gentle gradient which provides access for those who cannot manage steep steps. Mr Boulton’s last comments before the final formalities ending the interview with Dr Moats are ‘But the point isn’t what we can understand on the other side of it, it’s what are the confusions the children are experiencing before they get through it. The closer we get to that the better bridge we can build’. This surely gets to the heart of the matter: there are times when I feel that the experts in linguistics, phonetics and the history of English are steering us into waters which are far too deep for beginners and strugglers. Trainee-teachers may benefit from learning more technicalities about the way that speech sounds are represented by written symbols, but they also need to know how much of this knowledge to put aside in reducing teaching for beginners and strugglers to the simplest possible level. At this level, teaching is not rocket science.

Mona McNee instituted the UK RRF Newsletter and was its first editor..

*Editor’s comment: It is interesting that Keith Stanovich, on page 416 of his book *Progress in Understanding Reading* (Guilford Press, 2000), quotes his wife, Paula, a special education teacher, as using exactly the same ‘ramp’ image in 1997 as David Boulton used in 2003. Those who teach beginners and strugglers know how important a gentle gradient is at first.

**JOLLY PHONICS IN THE SLUMS OF HYDERABAD,
ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA**

**Dr Pauline Dixon
University of Newcastle**

James Tooley, Professor of Education Policy at the University of Newcastle, is currently carrying out research around the world in some of the poorest places on this planet. Interestingly and rather surprisingly James Tooley and his team are researching the phenomenon of private schools that cater for slum children in the poorest parts of India, Ghana, Nigeria, China and Kenya. The research is examining 'budget' private schools and considering both the quality and quantity of such schools.

Their research reveals a vibrant private-schools market in developing countries, where private schools cater for children of daily paid labourers, market traders, drivers, fishermen and peasant farmers. Parents are sometimes illiterate and have received very little schooling or education themselves. However, these parents recognise that in order for their children to succeed in life, education is of the utmost importance.

Poor parents around the world seem to be choosing private schools for different reasons in different countries. Entrepreneurs, community groups and charities have realised that parents demand private schooling, for whatever reason. Sometimes it is the breakdown of the government system that causes parents to send their children to private schools, in others, private schools are cheaper than government schools, and in some countries government schools don't cater for the children of slum dwellers or are not welcoming to them. And in India, especially, one of the main reasons that private schools are popular is that they are English-medium, whereas government schools teach English only as a subject. But learning English is a priority for parents.

Some of the team's major work is in the city of Hyderabad. Here in the slums there are private schools on almost every street corner. In three areas of the city over 500 private unaided schools have been located by Professor Tooley and his team. When the private-school owners were asked how their schools could be improved, the majority of them stated that they would like to improve the children's learning of English. Therefore a programme has been set up to introduce Jolly Phonics into schools and to analyse its effect.

In order to evaluate the impact of Jolly Phonics, two groups of private-school children are taking part in the programme – the learning group, that is those children participating in the Jolly Phonics lessons, and the control group which is statistically equivalent to the learning group in all respects except treatment status, i.e., they are not receiving Jolly Phonics lessons, but are continuing with their own school's method of teaching English. In total 556 children are participating in the study, with 293 children in the learning group and 263 children in the control group.

Jolly Phonics starter kits were kindly donated by Chris Jolly of *Jolly Phonics* to the Educare Trust, in Hyderabad. Six peripatetic teachers were trained, using the kits in June 2004. Each teacher has been assigned three of the learning schools and teaches Jolly Phonics every day for one hour in all of their three schools.

Prior to the commencement of teaching in July, all of the 556 students – both learning and control groups – took the Burt reading test ((1974) revised), the Schonell spelling test, a dictation test comprising of 20 sentences, and three NFER Nelson tests taken from the Diagnostic Reading Programme. The children have also taken the Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices test in order to establish their IQ.

The programme will run until the end of the year. The children will be tested again using the same tests after three months and at the end of the experiment in December. When the data have been collected the impact of the Jolly Phonics intervention will be determined by comparing the results of the learning and control groups. It is hoped that the study will provide invaluable evidence concerning the effectiveness of utilising phonetic teaching methods with young children in the slums of India. The programme has been enthusiastically received by the school owners, the children and the teachers. The findings will be reported in early 2005.

NEW BOOKS BY DIANE MCGUINNESS

RRF members will be interested in two new books by Prof. Diane McGuinness, both published in 2004: *Early Reading Instruction* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.) and *Growing a Reader from Birth* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York and London).

Growing a Reader from Birth is aimed largely at parents and is written in a simple non-technical style. Much of the book is taken up with a fascinating (and at times humorous) account of children's oral language development. Experiments are described which show that babies can discriminate sounds even while they are in the womb. Practical tips are given on the best ways of interacting orally with babies and toddlers to foster optimal language development. Most of the last quarter of the book consists of a chapter entitled 'All about reading', where parents are shown how they can get their children off to an excellent start in reading and writing as preschoolers if they are at all worried that the schools will not do the job properly. Finally, there are brief sections recommending 'classroom programs' and 'remedial programs for clinic and home use'. Parents will find this book extremely useful.

Beginning Reading Instruction covers some of the same ground as McGuinness's 1998 book *Why Children Can't Read*, but is more technical than this earlier book and very much more technical than *Growing a reader from birth*. It includes chapters on different writing-systems, on lessons from the past and from modern research on how best to teach reading, and on phoneme-awareness training. On this last topic, it is reassuring to find McGuinness's views meshing in well with RRF views as expressed in Newsletter 52: she writes that unless better evidence emerges than that which is currently available, 'the conclusion must be that separate phoneme awareness training programmes...do not come close to "improving reading" compared to a good linguistic-phonics program' (p. 188).

McGuinness deals particularly well with the special problems inherent in English spelling. Early in the book, she points out that 'Decoding, or reading, involves *recognition memory*, memory with a prompt. The letters remain visible while they are being decoded. Encoding, or spelling, involves *recall memory*, memory without prompts or clues, which is considerably more difficult' (p. 37). Later, there is a whole chapter called 'How does anyone learn to spell?', where she stresses that a good programme can 'jump-start' the learning process by making the logic of the code clear, 'but it will never succeed in teaching every word' (p. 248). The chapter ends with some very useful evidence and advice on the value of teaching letter-sound correspondences rather than letter-names: 'Jeffrey and Samuels (1967) and Samuels (1972) showed long ago that learning letter-sound relationships cut the learning time to decode words spelled with those letters by approximately 50 percent as compared with learning letter-names....The message is clear: *Discourage and eliminate*

the use of letter-names and encourage the use of phoneme-grapheme correspondences' (p. 278, italics original).

Of special interest to UK readers will be the way that McGuinness deals in some detail with *Jolly Phonics* and the Johnston and Watson *Fast Phonics First* programme and makes some very complimentary comments about them. The book ends with a chapter called 'New Directions for the Twenty-First Century', in which McGuinness gives a tantalising glimpse of her own forthcoming programme for beginners.

A slight drawback for UK readers is the fact that although the book is generally both UK- and USA-friendly, there *are* points at which McGuinness says things which do not quite work for the UK. For example, she regards the word 'hot' as containing the vowel sound /ah/ represented by the letter 'o' (true in American English, but not in British English), and her comments on what she calls 'vowel + r' phonemes do not all apply to British English – 'ar' and 'or' apparently represent diphthongs in American English (/ah/-/er/ and /oe/-/er/), but they represent monophthongs in British English.

This book may not be an easy read for most people, but anyone who makes the effort to read it will probably be glad to have done so.

Jennifer Chew

A new role recently taken on by Diane McGuinness is that of Patron of the 'Our Right to Read' foundation set up in Oxford by one of our RRF committee members, Fiona Nevola. Our Right to Read now has charitable status. The Trustees include the principal of an Oxford college, a city banker, a city solicitor and a publisher. Through a grants system, the organisation will provide individual tuition, based on Diane McGuinness's work, to struggling readers regardless of ability to pay. It is currently using the services of five teachers in Oxford and is conducting training for others. An article about this by Fiona will appear in the next Newsletter. She can be contacted at 01865-728760 or at fiona.nevola@virgin.net.

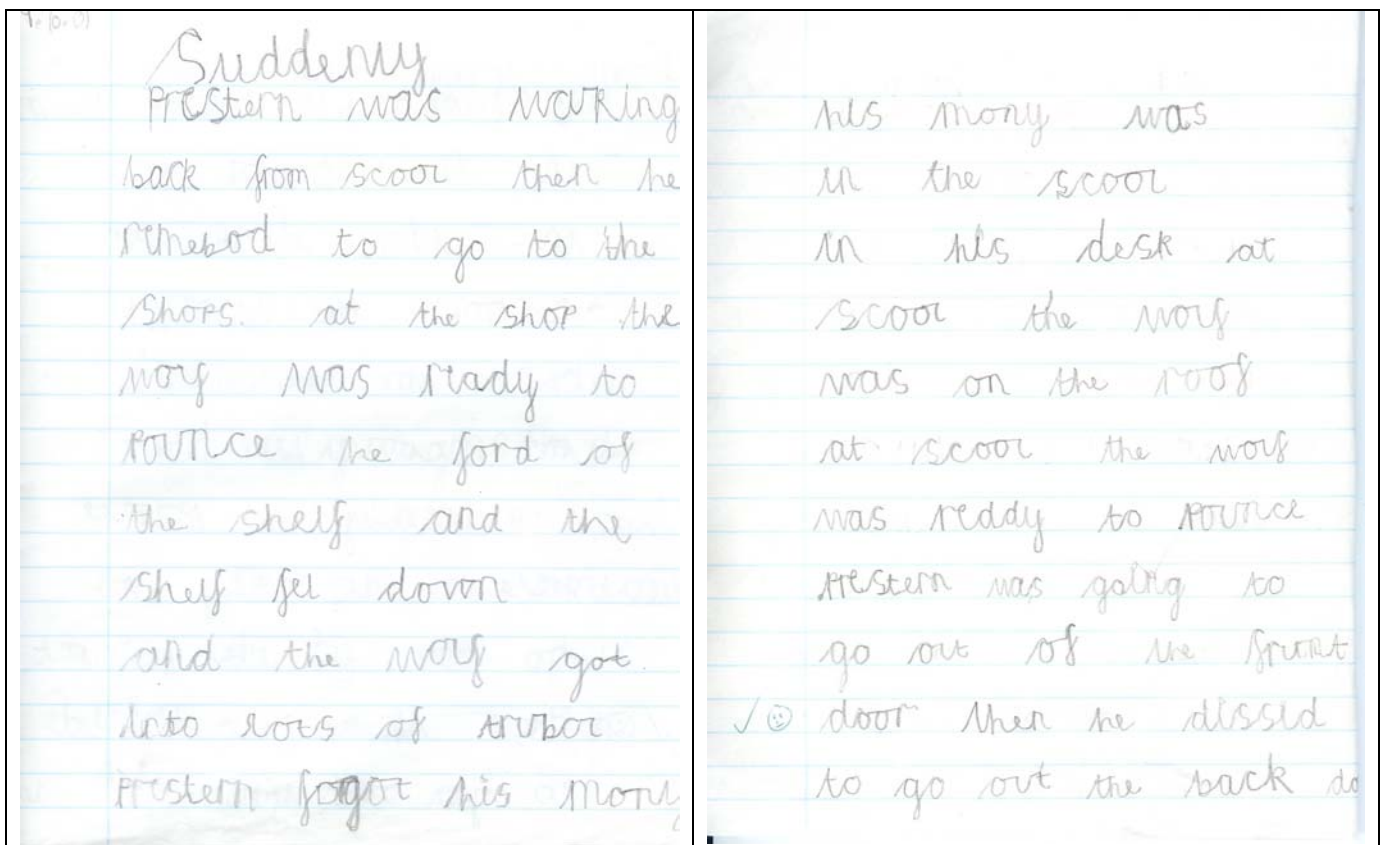
SPREADING HAPPINESS

Debbie Hepplewhite

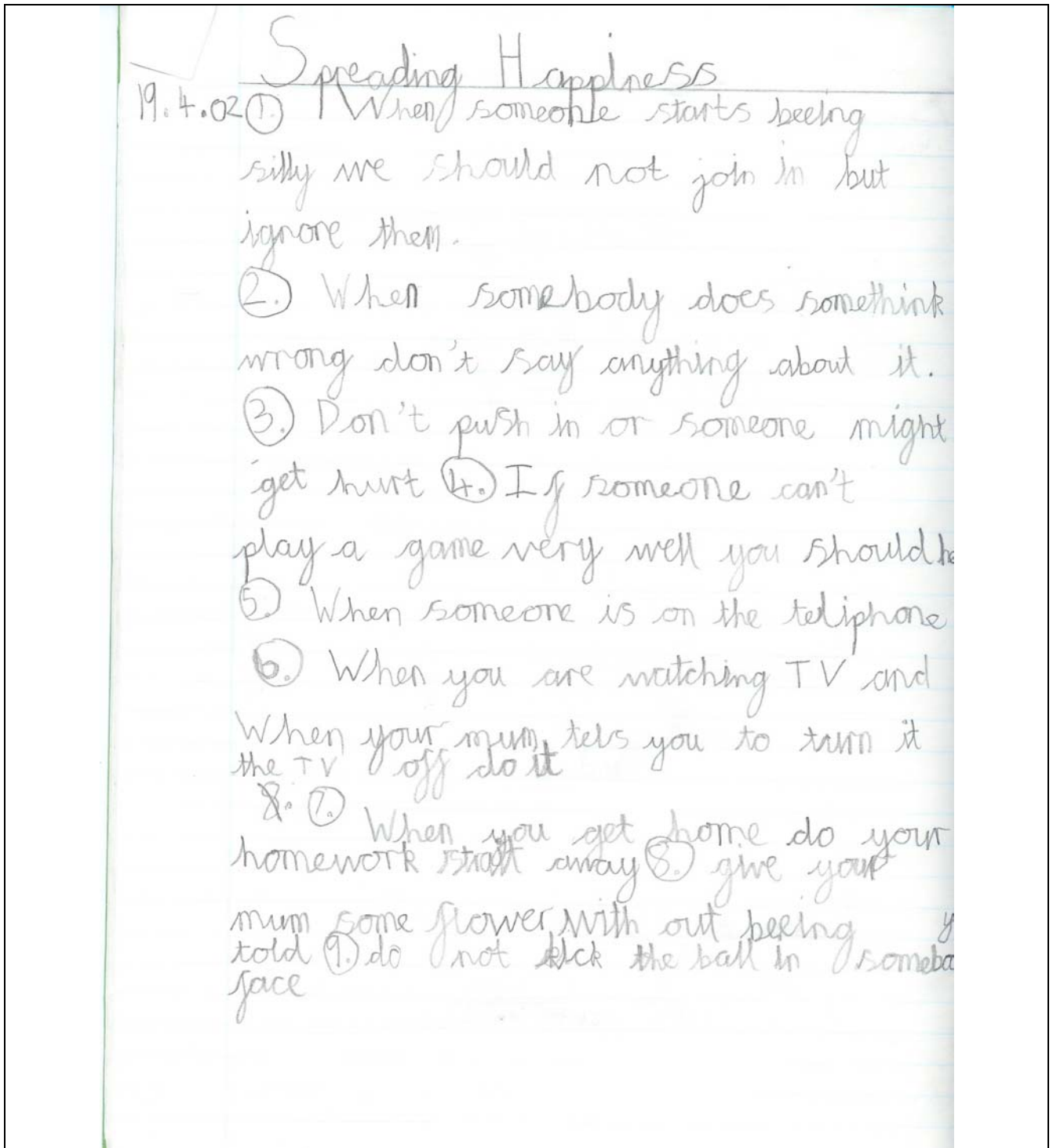
William, age 5, rewrote a story in his own words. This was his fifth week in Year 1 and he learnt how to join his letters only since entering Year 1. A comprehensive range of letter/s-sound correspondence knowledge (40+ speech sounds and some spelling variations) enabled William to write freely. The pace and rigour of Synthetic Phonics teaching resulted in William being attentive to the detail of spellings aided by his all-through-the-word scrutiny in reading activities (no guessing). In addition, William had the skill of being able to identify the sounds all-through-the-spoken-word (and words 'said in his head') enabling him to write confidently and independently and with rapidly growing accuracy.

Part of William's rewritten story:

'Suddenly'



The range of writing activities for William during Year 1 included handwriting practice, free-writing and creative writing, rewriting stories, regular news, spelling and dictation, writing notes from the board, completing exercises, writing as part of games (word, sentence and text level), writing for different purposes, writing in a range of genres across all curriculum subjects.



Of course, I would add to William's 'Spreading Happiness' list:

(10.) "When children have a Synthetic Phonics teacher!"

SYNTHETIC PHONICS TEACHING PRINCIPLES

1. Teach letter-shapes just by their sounds at first, not their names. That eliminates half of one particular part of the learning and leaves just the half that is going to be used directly ('directly' both in the sense of 'in a direct way' and in the sense of 'almost immediately'). Introduce letter names through singing an alphabet song in the first instance, but ensure that the automatic response to letters and letter-combinations is saying the sounds that they represent.
2. Teach letters and their sounds in groups that include consonants and vowels so that the children can read words, make words and spell words:
 - Teach blending all-through-the-word so that the children can *immediately* start using the few letter-sounds that they know in reading simple words - the practical application of code-knowledge makes them see the point of what they are learning and is very satisfying for them. While *teaching* blending, you cannot avoid pronouncing the whole word *after* the individual phonemes, but once the children begin to get the hang of it, avoid pronouncing the whole word whenever possible - get *them* to arrive at a pronunciation by sounding out and blending.
 - Teach segmenting all-through-the-spoken-word so that the children can immediately start using letter-sounds to spell simple words aloud and by writing.
3. Tolerate invented spelling at first, provided that it is phonemically accurate - children will understand the nature of the code better if they practise using it in both directions purely as a code (i.e. without worrying about spelling conventions - e.g. that the /k/ sound is represented in 'cat' by a 'c', not a 'k'). Avoid asking the children to write independently before they have been taught at least one way of representing all the main sounds in English.
4. Teach no sight words at first so that decoding is uppermost in children's minds and children do not develop an inappropriate reading reflex. When irregular words are tackled, teach the children to blend these words as well. Naturally they will have to be told the correct pronunciation. Then when an irregular word comes up in their reading the children will blend it and be reminded of that 'tricky' word.
5. Once the basic sounds of the alphabet letters have been covered including some digraphs, start introducing alternative sounds for the letters already learnt and alternative spellings for sounds.
6. Use texts which are decodable on the basis of what the children have been taught at any given point, and make it clear that these are not just to be decoded but also to be read for meaning. Do not promote reading strategies which are merely guessing words from pictures, context or initial letter cues.
7. Practise correct spelling, handwriting and simple punctuation through regular dictation. That is, controlled letters, spelling variations, words and sentences which the children can be expected to write.

These evidence-based teaching principles mean that children are not just learning letter-sound knowledge in a pure form but are also applying it from a very early stage which helps it to become embedded.

READING REFORM FOUNDATION COMMITTEE

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RRF Governing Statement

The Reading Reform Foundation is a non-profit making organisation. It was founded by educators and researchers who are concerned about the high functional illiteracy rates among children and adults in the United Kingdom and in the English-speaking world.

Based on a wealth of scientific evidence, members of the Reading Reform Foundation are convinced that reading failure is caused by faulty instructional methods. A particular fault of these methods is that they under-emphasise the need for children to be taught the alphabetic code: the way in which individual speech-sounds (phonemes) are represented by letters and combinations of letters. The United Kingdom chapter of the Reading Reform Foundation was set up in 1989 to promote the teaching of the alphabetic code in a research-based way, and this remains its main aim.

The governing principles are to:

- promote research-based principles of reading instruction
- promote the use of scientifically proven reading instruction programmes
- promote the use of standardised reading tests at frequent intervals
- provide information about effective teaching methods
- work to ensure that governmental departments become accountable for the effectiveness of the educational programmes they promote
- disseminate information through a newsletter and website on an ongoing basis



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