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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 were concerned about the high functional illiteracy rates among children and adults in the United Kingdom and in the English-speaking world.

On the basis of a wealth of scientific evidence, members of the Reading Reform Foundation are convinced that most 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 government departments become accountable for the effectiveness of the educational programmes they promote
- disseminate information through a newsletter and website on an ongoing basis.

NEXT ISSUE OF RRF NEWSLETTER

The next Newsletter is due out in June 2006. Please send contributions **no later than the middle of May**, by e-mail to jennifer@chew8.freemove.co.uk or by post to Mrs J. Chew, The Mount, Malt Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20 9PB. Subscriptions (£10 per year) should be sent to the same address.

EDITORIAL

We had hoped to be able to comment in this issue on both the interim and final reports resulting from Jim Rose's review of the teaching of reading, but the final report will appear just too late for this.

The Reading Reform Foundation has, however, been most encouraged by the interim report, which was published on 1 December 2005. We would like to congratulate Mr Rose on the understanding he has shown of the issues and particularly on his courage in recommending that the 'searchlights' model so central to the original National Literacy Strategy (NLS) should be replaced. His interim report was headed 'Independent review of the teaching of early reading'. It is *early* reading which is at issue, and paragraphs 34 to 36 make some excellent points about the danger of expecting beginners to behave like advanced readers. As Mr Rose says, 'there is a deceptively attractive tendency to start from the end of the reading process by identifying what skilled and proficient readers do, and then to assume that all the strategies of skilled reading need to be covered from children's first steps of learning to read. For many beginner readers, this can amount to a daunting and confusing experience' (paragraph 34). How right he is, and how much less daunting and confusing it is for beginners to focus at first just on letters, sounds and sound-blending at the simplest level.

Mr Rose goes on to quote exactly the passage from a 2002 report from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) which we quoted in the editorial of our last Newsletter (No. 56). In this passage, Ofsted criticized the 'searchlights' model for not distinguishing beginners from fluent readers (*The National Literacy Strategy: The first four years 1998-2002*, paragraph 58). We agreed with that criticism and Mr Rose has now done likewise. It is hard to see how people can argue, as some have done, that teaching simple phonics-for-reading (letter-sound correspondences and blending, using only very simple words at first) is not child-friendly when beginners have been expected to do something far more 'daunting and confusing' not only under the NLS but also under the overwhelmingly whole-language approaches that preceded it.

We also welcome Mr Rose's stance on the relationship between phonics, on the one hand, and positive attitudes to reading and writing on the other. He is right to say that 'it is absolutely not the case' that these two things are 'incompatible'. The attitude that they *are* incompatible has prevailed for too long, though not in synthetic-phonics circles. Phonics can in itself be fun as well as first and fast, and this kind of teaching can lay excellent foundations for the later enjoyment of books, not only because children develop positive attitudes to written language from the start through finding their first encounters with letters and sounds manageable and enjoyable, but also because the facility with word-reading which is developed by early systematic phonics makes the reading of continuous text a good deal easier. Several of the items in this Newsletter have a bearing on the way that decoding, comprehension and enjoyment interact with one another.

We have high hopes that Mr Rose's final report will continue the good work done in his interim report and will deal adequately with the changes in teacher-training that will be needed if good phonics teaching is to be implemented in September 2006. If all goes according to plan, we could notice significant differences by this time next year.

Jennifer Chew

A STORY FROM JAPAN

Peter Warner

Peter Warner, an American teaching in Japan, contributed this anecdote on the RRF message-board three days after the publication of Jim Rose's interim report.

I teach Japanese school children to read and write as much as possible, by synthetic phonics. A lot of my colleagues rave about extensive reading, and rave about some graded reading series or other. All the ones I've seen were loaded with difficult words, and the kids had to be read to, and remember the lines by sight or memory. I've seen this in other teachers' classes (chanting out lines in unison, until the kids could 'read' the text) and the whole charade repelled me.

I've put Dr Seuss out for my students to look at if they arrive early for class, but they always went for the coloured comics. When I heard about the 'Jelly and Bean' series, I jumped at it and ordered the first several units, but hadn't figured out how to introduce them. Last week, I put the 'B' unit (the second series) out on the counter and watched.

Cut to the chase: yesterday, two kids arrived early and sat on the couch, waiting while the earlier class was finishing up. I walked over and put a copy into each of their hands, then went back to the current class without a word. At first, there was the familiar 'Ahhh, not some more English...' kind of response. Then they opened the books and looked inside.

I wish I had filmed what happened next. In five seconds, their initial lack of interest was transformed into shock, then delight. They could *read* this! In ten seconds the two girls were laughing and reading their stories out loud to each other. As other children arrived, they were soon all going through the short books (there are ten in that series), and they complained when I called them to the table for their class to start.

I hope this episode repeats all week, and I want to build on it – man, do I want to build on it! With synthetic-phonics training, children can read and write *by themselves*, and once they have that experience, no one can take it away from them. Of course my classes are mostly in the CVC stage, but by golly it's a solid-foundation CVC stage.

The formal teaching of English in Japan is in the look-and-say mode (or rather, the look-and-say-in-Japanese-English mode), and I take great encouragement from the success celebrated by the RRF in the week in which Jim Rose's interim report was published.

AUSTRALIAN INQUIRY INTO THE TEACHING OF READING

Jennifer Chew

In Newsletter 56, we included edited extracts from the submission of Celeste Musgrave and Santina DiMauro to the above inquiry (the 'Nelson' inquiry). The committee's report was published just a few days after Jim Rose's interim report, and starts with the following two recommendations:

1. The Committee recommends that teachers be equipped with teaching strategies based on findings from rigorous, evidence-based research that are shown to be effective in enhancing the literacy development of all children.
2. The Committee recommends that teachers provide **systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction** so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers provide

an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies.

There are also recommendations on testing and on teacher-training. In Australia as in Britain, there seems to be a realization that phonics teaching has not been nearly systematic enough. Predictably, however, not everyone agrees. In his response, Brian Cambourne, of the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong, writes the following under the heading ‘Extreme Phonics Is The Thalidomide of Literacy Instruction’:

‘We should be wary of the kind of phonics that Dr Nelson’s Teaching Reading report recommends. There are (at least) three positions on phonics: One position is “intensive (explicit) systematic phonics”, an extremist view that insists that all the major rules of phonics be explicitly taught in a strict order. This seems to be the position taken in the Report. The writers of the report seem to have ignored the multitude of studies which show that children taught by Extreme Phonics score highly on tests of pronouncing words in isolation, but fail miserably on tests which test their understanding of texts. They also develop negative attitudes toward reading.’

We suspect that Mr Cambourne would regard ‘synthetic phonics’ as ‘extreme phonics’. The evidence known to the RRF, however, is that children who are started off on synthetic phonics do not develop ‘negative attitudes toward reading’ and that they show an ‘understanding of texts’ which is if anything rather good. We have recently heard of an as yet unfinished study which is comparing the performance, towards the end of primary school, of children who were started off on synthetic phonics and children taught by the National Literacy Strategy. Preliminary findings show the synthetic-phonics children scoring better not only at word-reading and spelling but also at comprehension, despite the fact that the NLS regards itself as putting great emphasis on comprehension. These findings would fit in well with the Key Stage 2 results obtained at schools known to give beginners a thorough synthetic-phonics start. Good performance in the Key Stage 2 reading test is good performance at comprehension, as comprehension is what is measured by this test, and test results in synthetic-phonics schools tend to be well above the national average.

Mr Cambourne goes on to say that he knows of no teacher or scholar who believes in teaching ‘Zero Phonics’ and that what is found in most Australian schools is ‘Basic Phonics, the direct teaching of those straightforward rules that students can learn, remember, and apply while reading to help make texts more comprehensible. Basic phonics claims that our knowledge of the complex rules of phonics is the result of reading, not its cause’. Many of us would agree that most children deduce the more ‘complex rules of phonics’ as a result of reading rather than needing to be taught them explicitly, but the question of how much needs to be explicitly taught remains an important one. The evidence in Australia, as in Britain, is that standards of reading and spelling are not what they should be and this is arguably because the ‘basic phonics’ that children are taught is not enough for many or even most of them: they need to be taught considerably more about the way that the alphabetic code works before they will deduce the rest for themselves.

JOLLY PHONICS IN THE GAMBIA – PART TWO

Marj Hitching

Introduction

Wellingara Community Nursery School is a 360-place school for 3-7-year-olds in a semi-urban village of 17,000 inhabitants in The Gambia, West Africa. In the first article, in RRF Newsletter 55, Summer 2005, I described how the ‘alphabet letters’ were taught in rote fashion from the blackboard, and how I came to introduce *Jolly Phonics* to the school, starting with a weekend workshop in May 2005.

Preparation

I left a training schedule for the staff – learning the stories, actions, letter formation and songs, and familiarising themselves with *The Phonics Handbook*. I returned in September 2005 for the start of term. Again, the staff willingly spent most of their weekend revising, questioning, looking at resources (some kindly donated by Chris Jolly and some I had made at home) and singing. What some of the staff lack in basic teaching skills is made up for by their enthusiasm and willingness to learn. The more recently appointed staff are better trained, but for all, taking on *Jolly Phonics* has been a huge learning curve and I have been full of admiration for the way in which they have dedicated themselves to understanding synthetic phonics. Teaching in Wellingara is not easy in the heat – some days there is no electricity so the ceiling fans don’t work and as the water supply is very erratic there is often no drinking water available (and the toilets don’t flush!).

The atmosphere in Gambia is so hot and dusty that paper or card very quickly falls off the walls, so in anticipation of *Jolly Phonics* displays, large boards were fitted in two classrooms. In order to accommodate the daily *JP* lesson, the timetable was altered, which produced a better balance of lessons and breaks than had previously been the case.

Two university graduates – one an NQT (newly qualified teacher) – had arrived from the UK in September to work as volunteers in the school until Christmas. One had some *JP* experience during her teaching practice. These two young women had looked at the *JP* website before going to Gambia and then attended my ‘revision workshop’ before school reopened.

Getting started

The school is divided into eight classes – one Toddlers’ class of 3-4-year-olds and seven Nursery classes for 5-7-year-olds. The Toddlers’ class started *JP* in the third week with just the letter sounds, and actions together with the appropriate songs, often accompanied by drumming and dancing. (The culture of dance is so strong that any form of music makes the children get up and dance.)

The Nursery classes started *JP* on the second day of term. The children love it and have taken to it with great enthusiasm. There are lots of displays on the boards and the songs are performed with great gusto! However, the Gambian English accent is so pronounced that unless one knows the words it’s quite difficult to understand what they are singing.

Difficulties and successes

Of course there have been difficulties in the first term. The two volunteers wrote a report highlighting these.* Staff needed to be reminded to work through the five sections for each letter sound. The pace was generally slower than is preferred for

UK, but I think this will increase as the teachers become more confident and experienced – it will settle into ‘Fast for Gambia’.

All the children speak their own tribal language and possibly one other, as well as English. All teaching is in English, but some children are finding it hard to blend words they don’t know the meaning of. The pronunciation of /l/ and /r/ is proving difficult, Gambians say /d/ for /th/, and /c/ often sounds like /t/.

Quite a number of children are reversing letter formation or even whole words. Although they have also to cope with Arabic lessons where writing is from right to left, I am assured by staff that this is not the reason some children are writing English in this direction. I will be investigating this during my January/February visit. All children seemed to be holding their pencils correctly.

The volunteers pointed out that although staff can identify the fast and slow learners, the middle group seems ‘a grey area’, and staff do not differentiate the work. Of course, it is difficult for the staff, who have never taught in this way before, to know how to accommodate differing ability levels, and high class numbers, with no support assistants, make it almost impossible. Some literate parents (women) have been attending *JP* training classes for adults, and I hope that in future they might assist in the classroom. However, these classes were poorly attended, possibly because of the heavy burden of the many domestic duties which women in this culture have to undertake.

The week before the volunteers left Wellingara they arranged an inter-class *JP* competition outside, with games utilising the letter sounds, huge flashcards and the letter actions. This was a great success, and the prizes were storybooks and an English dictionary for the teacher with the best classroom display.

But what of the future?

Against all the successes so far, a serious problem is on the horizon. My concern at the outset of this project was for the continuity when the children start their formal, state education at the age of seven. At the start of term parents were asking staff, ‘Why isn’t the ABC being taught any more?’ The response was ‘Yes, it is, but in a different order’. As the term progressed, parents have seen what the children are achieving, and they are worried about what will happen when they start state education where often, phonics is not taught.

Our school is in ‘uncharted waters’, in that we don’t know what stage the ‘leavers’ will have reached by next July – they could be streets ahead of those just starting their education at 7 years. About 80% of our children will go to the Lower Basic Primary School nearby, where the head teacher is very supportive of *JP* and has promised that the children will be kept together in two classes. The staff there attended my last workshop and will continue *JP*. However, the parents of the 20% of children who will transfer to other schools (because of where they live) are very concerned. I am currently in discussion with Chris Jolly about this, and we may attempt to get the Department of State for Education (DOSE) to change their policy and introduce synthetic phonics into all the Lower Basic Primary schools. DOSE considers nursery education to be private (and does not pay the teachers – our teachers are funded via our charity’s children’s sponsorship scheme). The reason our school has such high numbers is that it has an excellent reputation, and children come from other areas but will have to return to their own catchment area at the start of formal education.

My hope is that DOSE will be so impressed with the results of *JP* at our school that they will rethink their policy for the 7+ children. An ambitious target, but better than learning letter names by rote from the board.

In the meantime, I am returning to the school for three weeks at the end of January, when I will be monitoring the teaching and learning of *JP* and addressing some of the difficulties highlighted by the volunteers. I would like to thank Chris Jolly and Sue Lloyd for their sound advice. The bigger question of continuity as they children move into state education will be high on the agenda.

*Young, Victoria & Wills, Nicky, December 2005. Report on the first term of teaching *Jolly Phonics* at Wellingara Nursery School, The Gambia, West Africa.

Marj Hitching is a Trustee and Secretary of '1 to 3' Reg. Charity 1082151 which supports education and welfare in Wellingara and works in partnership with Wellingara Community Initiative Support. Further information can be had by e-mailing marj@mhitching.freemove.co.uk

YOU CAN'T FOOL ALL...

Mona McNee

Mona McNee, the first editor of the RRF Newsletter, gives a personal view of some milestones in educational developments in general and in the teaching of reading in particular. Developments which she regards as good are printed in boxes.

The story so far

1762: J.-J. Rousseau's essay, "Emile", advocated that children should be allowed to develop naturally. Rousseau fathered five children, then left their rearing to a local home for foundlings. How did he gain such stature? His writings had enormous influence.

1826: The 'meaning method' was introduced in the USA and UK

1875: Col. Parker introduced reading for meaning, the meaning method, to Quincy schools, Mass. The failure was evident, and the 'meaning method' was identified as ineffective, but Boston schools were persuaded to try it. After a fair pilot, and the resulting failure, the burghers of Boston threw it out. Parker nevertheless continued to promote it elsewhere.

1908: Edmund Burke Huey published *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* (Macmillan Press). This continued the move away from phonics.

1930: A look-say reading scheme, "Dick and Jane" (Scott Foresman), swept across America.

1931: The Hadow Report stated, 'The curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored.' This really said that schools should stop teaching. There was no challenge to this madness. This change is now almost complete.

1945: Professor Fred Schonell's *The Psychology and Teaching of Reading* was published, and became and remained the Bible for student teachers in UK for decades. He never said phonics did not work, just that it was old-fashioned 'deadly drill', and that instead of sounding out a sequence of sounds from a sequence of letters, we read from 'visual pattern' – the outline shape of a whole word. He said that instead of paying attention to a sequence of letters, we pay more attention to the first letter, and he promoted the idea that we would read more easily words that were interesting to us.

1955: Rudolf Flesch's book *Why Johnny Can't Read* was published, causing a furore. It was a polemic against look-say, and a best-seller for nine months in America.

1956: The International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction (ICIRI) merged with the National Association for Remedial Teaching to form the International Reading Association.

1958: The Reading Reform Foundation (USA) was set up. Its sole aim was ‘To restore intensive phonics to the teaching of reading throughout the nation’.

1964: The Ladybird Keywords look-say reading scheme (‘Peter and Jane’) swept through British primary schools, an economic profit-maker but an educational disaster.

1967: *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* was published. This was a book by Jeanne Chall of Harvard University, who argued in favour of phonics-first.

1967: The report of the National Reading Panel (USA) found in favour of phonics teaching.

1971: Dennis Hogenson (Minneapolis) wrote ‘We have paid far too little attention to the eventual social consequences of this deeply humiliating experience’ (i.e. reading failure).

1981: Frank Smith promoted the idea that ‘You learn to read by reading’.

1981: Rudolph Flesch’s book *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read* was published.

1982: *The Complete Handbook of Reading Disorders* was published. This was by Dr Hilde Mosse, who was for many years a New York physician specialising in child psychiatry. She ‘strongly recommended a multi-sensory, intensive phonetic approach’ to reading.

1970s to 1990s in the USA: Kenneth Goodman, a professor at the University of Arizona, promoted the theory of Whole Language, that when reading we do not just use printed letters, but also the surrounding text, pictures if any, and our previous literary and life experience. He was really talking about comprehension, and although this was irrelevant for beginners sounding out three letters to make a CVC word such as ‘cat’, it matched the Hadow idea of experience rather than facts and knowledge, and somehow he gained immense credibility, although his attitude did not help beginners. Fashion then prevailed over fact or common sense.

1970s to 1990s in the UK: Teacher-training institutions enthusiastically welcomed the ideas of Smith and Goodman and the closely related ideas of Liz Waterland, whose ‘apprenticeship approach’ (see her 1985 book *Read with Me*) was heavily promoted in initial teacher-training courses. Margaret Meek (Institute of Education, London University) would ask students starting their PGCE course to say what mattered in learning to read, and each year they came up with the right items – letters, sounds. She then asked them to read a difficult paragraph by Faulkner, and used that to convince them we read from the general sense (see the chapter ‘Teachers learning about literacy’ by Judith Graham in *New Readings: Contributions to an Understanding of Literacy*, A. and C. Black, 1992). She wrote that ‘Any significant research I have done rests on my having treated anecdotes as evidence’ (*How Texts Teach what Readers Learn*, 1988).

But throughout these decades, Dr Joyce Morris urged phonics.

1989: The UK Chapter of the RRF was set up.

1990: *Step by Step*, by Mona McNee, was published.

1993: The National Right to Read Foundation was set up in the USA

1994: I moved to Knowsley hoping to improve reading. It was and is bottom of the league tables. I hoped to change this, but I have been largely ignored.

1996, 1999: Books by Jeni Riley (Institute of Education, London University) were published: *The Teaching of Reading: The Development of Literacy in the Early Years of School* and *Teaching Reading at Key Stage 1 and Before*. I talked to Dr Riley's students once at the Institute, and the first question raised was, 'How can we follow your advice when it runs counter to all we hear here?' In her 1996 book *The Teaching of Reading* Jeni Riley gives results from supposedly good teachers, results which are pathetic. Her expectations were of reading performance far below potential.

1997: Bonnie Macmillan's *Why Schoolchildren Can't Read* was published by the Institute of Economic Affairs.

1997: *Why Our Children Can't Read*, by Diane McGuinness, was published in the USA. The British edition was published the following year.

1998: The first report was published of the successful use of phonics in Clackmannanshire, Scotland.

1998: The National Literacy Strategy was adopted in UK primary schools (though not in Scotland), with supplements thereafter.

2000: The report of the National Reading Panel was published in the USA.

2002: A New Zealand government report on teaching adults was 'dismissed' by politicians.

2003: Five-year follow-up findings from Clackmannanshire were reported at the seminar on phonics organised by the Department for Education and Skills.

2005 (December): The Interim Report of Jim Rose's team was published.

2005 (December): The Nelson Report was published in Australia.

2005: Backlash – the Literacy Educators' Coalition (Australia) was formed by people involved with teaching reading.

2006: This backlash extended, and all the Australian teachers' unions signalled that they would oppose a back-to-basics literacy push if it involves the return of 'school curriculums to the 1950s', as was reported in *The Australian* of 1 February 2006. Throughout the English-speaking world, we find the protection of long-standing mediocre education by people such as teacher trainers, Local Education Authority advisers and head teachers, and by organisations such as the United Kingdom Literacy Association, the National Association for the Teaching of English in the UK and their equivalents elsewhere.

2006: *In 11 years I have found NO professional curiosity at all within Knowsley LEA. The same had been true in my previous 20 years in Norfolk. Instead, the establishment has continued to accept, spread and support unchallenged the flawed, harmful ideas enshrined in the National Literacy Strategy and its supplements.*

For more detail, read *The Hidden Story* by Geraldine Rodgers.

Editor's note: Since writing this article, Mona McNee has received an invitation to speak on 'synthetic phonics' at a meeting being organised on 10 May 2006 by the Liverpool Dyslexia Association.

**COMMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS
ON JIM ROSE'S INTERIM REPORT**

Steve Sinnott (NUT General Secretary), commenting on Jim Rose's interim report, is quoted as saying, 'Phonics has too often been hijacked by politicians as a weapon to beat each other with rather than being seen as a vital but not exclusive method of teaching reading...But we all need to recognise that teaching the meaning of words and a love of reading is also vital.'

Is he really thinking in terms of beginners having to read texts containing many words whose meanings they need to be taught because they do not already know them? Surely most of us, including whole-word and whole-language advocates, are *not* thinking in these terms. Rather, we are thinking in terms of texts consisting of words whose meanings children already know – they would understand the words perfectly well if the texts were read aloud to them. So the children don't need to be taught the *meanings* of these words: they need to be taught how to translate the printed words into spoken words, because the meanings will then be obvious. Later, of course, they may encounter texts containing words with unfamiliar meanings and sentences constructed in complex ways: with these texts, decoding printed words into spoken words may not give instant access to meaning – but this is a later step and not a first step.

As far as 'a love of reading' is concerned, children are much more likely to enjoy doing something that they can do quite comfortably than something that is a struggle. They should not be expected to run before they can walk. During the 'toddling' stage, which can last as little as a term, children in synthetic-phonics classrooms experience two kinds of enjoyment: the enjoyment of learning how the alphabetic code works, which can be fun and rewarding in itself, and the enjoyment of hearing stories read aloud fluently and expressively by teachers, which is surely much more rewarding for beginners than struggling to read the stories themselves at this early stage. Torgerson et al., in a very recent study commissioned and funded by the Department for Education and Skills, have said that regarding synthetic-phonics advocates as not wanting children to have books is a 'caricature'.

So phonics is not an 'exclusive method of teaching reading' in the sense of excluding reading for meaning and reading for pleasure. It certainly emphasises these things, but in ways which are appropriate for the stage which children have reached. It recognises that beginners are a very special case. Jim Rose has done likewise in his interim report and he is surely right to do so.

SOUND FOUNDATIONS –

THE INTENSIVE SYNTHETIC-PHONICS PROGRAMME FOR THE SLOWEST READERS

Tom Burkard

Barnardiston Hall Preparatory School in Suffolk accepts pupils with a wide range of learning difficulties. Their head of pre-prep, Ann Marie Cheason, has a very sophisticated understanding of the principles and practices that make synthetic phonics work. She uses *Jolly Phonics* for whole-class instruction, but inevitably there is a substantial number of children who need a lot more intensive teaching. This is where *Sound Foundations* comes in. Last school year, all their 7-year-olds achieved Level 2B or above on their Key Stage 1 English SATs. Considering that many of their pupils have very severe dyslexia, this is no mean feat.

Barnardiston first started using *Sound Foundations* in 2002. At first, we trained five classroom assistants to work with their SEN pupils. This didn't work well: in a bustling school like Barnardiston, you need to have focused instructors who can ensure that pupils get the short, daily lessons that they need. The following year their SEN department employed two teaching assistants, Iona Hayes and Neil Jeffries, to give a substantial percentage of their time to using *Sound Foundations*. The results were immediate and dramatic. Although we gave Iona and Neil no training, and they have no qualifications of any sort, they quickly understood the logic of our system. Working closely with Ms Cheason and her department, they have helped to make Barnardiston into a school where there are no excuses for reading failure.

Sound Foundations consists of separate decoding and spelling programmes. We decided against an integrated reading and spelling programme because some SEN pupils make faster progress on decoding, and others find spelling easier. Also, it is easier to teach spelling in groups: only one child can read at a time, but any number can write.

The decoding strand, *Dancing Bears*, is designed to be used for 10 minutes per day with each pupil. Considering that the average infant school class of 25 pupils will have 6 pupils who need extra help, this amounts to only an extra hour of instruction per day. Most schools waste far more time than this with ineffective 'shared reading' schemes. The spelling strand, *Apples and Pears*, can be used with groups of up to 10 pupils, so long as they are well matched for ability.

Sound Foundations works from the principle that decoding and spelling are lower-order cognitive skills which are most efficiently taught through straightforward behaviourist training. Decoding and spelling are the *keys* that enable children to become literate, in the highest sense of the word. Whole-language advocates have done immeasurable harm in English-speaking countries because they fail to understand that higher-order skills have very little to do with mastering the English spelling code.

From this principle, it follows that the most efficient means of teaching decoding and spelling are to induce the pupil to make the maximum number of correct responses in the shortest period of time. Everything in *Sound Foundations* is oriented to this goal. All materials contain massive amounts of overlearning – far more than in any other remedial literacy programme. All this is presented in a variety of formats, and reinforced at strategic intervals to ensure that virtually all pupils develop automatic, unmediated responses.

Since children with reading problems almost always have problems with one or more short-term memory functions, daily lessons are essential. Otherwise, so much is forgotten from one lesson to the next that very little gets into the long-term memory.

As the tasks in learning to read and spell are sequential, SEN pupils need to develop automaticity of response at each level before they can progress. For instance, *Sound Foundations* uses flashcards to teach basic letter sounds and unambiguous digraphs. These cards are practised at least once a day until responses are instant. Many children who come to the Promethean Trust know their letter sounds, but their response is so slow that they can't blend – when they are reading 'cat', they have forgotten the /c/ by the time they get to the /t/.

And because daily lessons are so important, we have done everything we can to make *Sound Foundations* simple to use. Our materials can even be used by parents who are themselves only just literate. In schools, almost any classroom assistant can use them effectively, even with no training at all.

The only thing that is counter-intuitive about *Sound Foundations* is that when children get a word wrong, they are *not* encouraged to work it out on their own. This is almost invariably counter-productive, because once an incorrect decoding is lodged in a pupil's head, the process of trying to correct it is trying for both the teacher and the pupil. Our aim is to encourage pupils to decode, rather than to guess – and we do not want them to get the idea that decoding is too difficult. So when children are unable to read a word or to self-correct an error, we simply tell them the word, and the pupil repeats it. The same item is presented again after a very short interval. The instinct to encourage children to work things out for themselves is very strong, but it must be resisted. For a start, it encourages 'guessing'. It slows the lesson down. And most importantly, it focuses children's attention on what they *can't* do.

Beyond dispute, *Sound Foundations* is a synthetic-phonics programme, and it is compatible with *Jolly Phonics* and most other synthetic-phonics whole-class programmes. Children are capable of thriving on a varied diet, so long as the diet doesn't contain unhealthy ingredients, such as word-guessing. The broad objective of *Dancing Bears* is, of course, to teach children mastery of the English spelling code so that response to print is instant and automatic. This must operate independently of lexical matching, or the child's ability to read unfamiliar words will be seriously impaired. The broad objective of *Apples and Pears* is to teach the pupil to spell a broad range of high-to-medium frequency words without a mediated response, and to teach phonemic and morphological knowledge so that new spellings are more easily remembered. The upper levels of *Apples and Pears* also teach the use of the apostrophe, and the meanings of many 'academic' words – that is, multi-syllable words with Greek and Latin etymology.

Ultimately, the goal of all instruction is to produce unmediated responses. Pupils who have to remember a mnemonic device such as 'big elephants can always understand small elephants' (to spell 'because') will necessarily be distracted from the content of their writing. Likewise, formal rules – both for spelling and reading – are at best temporary crutches. Clymer's classic study* should serve as a warning to anyone who attempts to use a rule-bound approach to phonics; rules have a nasty habit of letting you down when you need them the most. Consequently, *Sound Foundations* teaches relatively few rules for spelling, and almost none for reading. Instead, the primary medium of instruction is *modelling*.

A consequence of this approach is that easily-confused items are not taught together. Relatively unambiguous digraphs such as /ee/, /ar/ and /sh/ are taught first. With ambiguous ones such as /ea/, the short sound is not taught until the long sound has been thoroughly mastered, and the long /a/ sound is delayed until both of the former are firm. The same principle applies to spelling: the different ways of spelling a sound are kept as far apart as possible. Poor spellers are, almost by definition, deficient in visual memory: the common practice of asking them to make such discriminations by

writing the word to see if it ‘looks right’ often fails. Not many poor spellers ever do this unless they are told to, so it is clearly a low-utility strategy.

But perhaps the most revolutionary point about *Sound Foundations* is that it is a *living programme*. That is to say, it is under constant revision. There is no teaching programme which is so good that it cannot be improved. In fact, we believe that reading pedagogy is barely out of the horseless carriage stage of development. *Dancing Bears* is only four years old, and it is already in its fourth edition. The fifth edition will almost certainly be in print by the time this article appears, and we are already thinking about the sixth. Of course, we could not do this if we did not teach children ourselves. All the best synthetic-phonics programmes are written by teachers who share our enthusiasm for putting their experience in print.

*Editor’s note: A good source of information on Clymer’s study is *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print* by Marilyn Jager Adams. The study was originally published in *The Reading Teacher* in 1963. Clymer analysed 45 phonic generalizations that were commonly taught to primary-school children to see how frequently they applied to words which these children were expected to be able to read, for example in ‘basals’ (reading-scheme books). He found that many of the generalisations were not very useful. In 1999, also in *The Reading Teacher*, Francine Johnston showed that some of the rules became more useful if they were reworded, and suggested that although English orthography is too complex to be reduced to a few rules, there *are* some generalisations that are worth teaching.

The teaching of a few rules, rather than many, has probably been characteristic of British phonics programmes, and this may be a difference between them and American programmes. Tom Burkard, however, is surely right in saying that a rule-bound approach to phonics is not ideal, especially for children who are struggling.

SNIPPET FROM *THE INDEPENDENT*

On 21 January 2006, *The Independent* reported that a study conducted by researchers from Cambridge Assessment, part of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, had found that ‘today’s GCSE candidates are twice as bad at spelling as their O-Level counterparts of the 1980s and much more likely to use slang in examinations papers – even in scripts awarded to-grade passes’.

In English scripts graded A to E in 2004, 1.9% of words were misspelt, as against 0.9% in the 1980s. The 2004 figures were nevertheless an improvement on those found by the same body in a similar 1996 survey, when 2.6% of words were misspelt by candidates gaining A to E in GCSE English. These percentages may sound low, but anyone who has marked student scripts will know that those containing two or three spelling errors per hundred words look badly spelt.

THE BRIGHTEST KIDS NEED HELP TOO

‘Sally R’

The following is a slightly edited version of a message posted on the RRF message-board. It appears here with the author’s permission.

After hearing about the work of the Reading Reform Foundation, I would like to share with you my own experience of struggling with the legacy of learning to read by shape alone.

I need to tell you to begin with that on the surface that you won’t be able to uncover any cracks in my school career. I have left nothing behind me but a trail of the highest marks and the prizes that went along with them – across all subjects – ending up with a first-class degree in Mathematics from Cambridge University. You have to forgive me saying this up front. I’m almost thirty now and have no need to boast – it is just that this is crucial to the point of the story.

I have loved books from an early age. My first favourite authors were Enid Blyton and Catherine Cookson. At twelve I read *Great Expectations* and, guided by good English teaching at secondary school, I moved on to Wilkie Collins, Jane Austen, Shakespeare, the Brontë sisters and from there to Steinbeck, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Fitzgerald, Hardy and Joyce. On the surface, I was one of the able kids who had obviously benefited from the education I had received to date, and was a success of the system.

But behind the scenes, there was something I was struggling with. I was sure that there was something that was blocking my learning somehow, but I didn’t know what it was. I came to believe that each of us must have learning difficulties, however mild or peculiar to us they may be, because I felt that despite my achievements I clearly had something that made some types of learning hard. I knew in particular that I wasn’t progressing with speaking and listening to foreign languages, as I would have liked to. It was something that I found difficult to pick up. I remember reporting this fact to both my German and French teachers, who just dismissed my claims – I was still at the top of the top set – there was clearly no real problem. A few English reports commented on my poor spelling and I took meticulous care with my essays to cover this up. My mum mentioned to me at this time that compared to my sisters, who had learned to read by breaking down words and associating them with sound, I had simply taken a whole word on board at once and memorised it. I now realise that the result of this was that I never learnt to associate sounds with words. I cannot connect how a word looks on the page to how it sounds.

Despite my wide reading I have a very limited vocabulary. I haven’t picked up new words from the books I have read. After reading *Crime and Punishment* for the hundredth time I didn’t recognise the name of the protagonist ‘Raskolnikov’ when discussing the book for the first time with a friend. I realised that I had never properly read any of the Russian names at all and had truncated the hero of the story simply to ‘R’ in my head as I read. To me, that was how ‘Raskolnikov’ sounded, because I didn’t naturally turn it into a sound but saw it as a pattern on the page. I can’t read words that are unfamiliar. I think I have come to kind of jump them in texts, guessing the meaning as I go.

This has large consequences in reading academically. As a 17-year-old, the two subjects that were looking the most attractive to me were philosophy and physics. I briefly considered taking a dual degree. At that time, there was lots of literature avail-

able to me to take me further in science than I was able to go in school. Popular science books and scientific undergraduate textbooks were written in a straightforward style and were therefore accessible to me. Unlike the more common problem of being afraid of basic equations, I was instead turned off by long words. In philosophy this was a problem. I was unable to approach any significant philosophical work simply because the words were too complex for me.

I chose to study Mathematics. I have never regretted it; I am a scholar and love my studies. But interestingly enough, having understood where my teaching troubles have come from, and that they do not fundamentally prevent me from getting to grips with profound philosophical ideas, I am now returning to university to do a Master's in Philosophy this September. I read philosophy alongside an internet dictionary which speaks the words to me. Last week I typed in 'immanent' and was shocked by the result. I knew the word after all; it just looked unfamiliar written down. It couldn't have been one of the few thousand I put into my head before I was six years old.

I have been living and working in Germany for over a year and learning how to learn a language using sound and connecting it to words. It has been a fascinating experience, although frustrating that I was never given this opportunity as a child, when my ability to remember was much greater.

The way you learn to read stays with you forever and is a handicap that continually crops up. In my job as a consultant, every so often when I am presenting, I get stuck on a word, which I can only see and don't know how to pronounce. And here's my next hurdle coming up: I would like to continue my philosophy studies with a doctorate if I am able enough and can get some financial support. Some of the best courses are in the USA. I would need to pass the general graduate admissions exam which – very annoyingly – includes a large section where the examinee is presented with long words and asked to select the correct meaning. It isn't supposed to test vocabulary per se, the examinee is supposed to be able to work out the meaning by breaking the word down into pieces. But that supposes that I can read the words in the first place and do the breaking-down process. I'm not looking forward to trying it out.

I don't mean to say that my life has been severely disrupted. I don't mean to suggest that I have been disadvantaged in a way that compares to the problems faced by someone who never learns to read. I am incredibly lucky to have all of the opportunities given to me and have been able to do the things I have. But I truly believe there must be capable, able kids out there who must have lost out more than me – perhaps the struggle with words was the straw that stopped them from going to university, for example. I just want to make the point that synthetic phonics (I had to look up that spelling, I've never used that word before) is something that can benefit many people in many different ways and education is about allowing all of our children to fulfil our potential – even the brightest ones.

So I have to applaud all of you working to promote synthetic phonics – this really makes a difference.

LETTERLAND:

A RESPONSE TO THE ARTICLE IN NEWSLETTER 56

Elizabeth Nonweiler

Letterland was first published in 1985. At a time when the education establishment rejected all phonics-based teaching, it was a pioneering programme. As a result *Letterland* has contributed to the current progress in our campaign to promote the use of synthetic phonics.

Yet the decision to include an article about *Letterland* by its author in Newsletter 56 has raised questions from several readers. Why was it included? Did its inclusion mean that the RRF recommends it? Is *Letterland* effective? Is it truly a synthetic-phonics programme? This article is an attempt to answer these questions.

- **Why was the article included in the Newsletter?**

Last year on the RRF Message Board there were discussions about *Letterland* and some contributors made negative comments. Lyn Wendon, the author of *Letterland*, asked the RRF if she could respond to those criticisms in a Newsletter, and it was agreed that she should have that opportunity.

- **Does the inclusion of the article mean that the RRF recommends the use of *Letterland*?**

The decision to include the article was based only on the reason given above. It was not meant to be a recommendation of *Letterland* by the RRF.

- **Is *Letterland* effective?**

One of the principles of the RRF is to ‘provide information about effective teaching methods’ and another is to ‘promote the use of scientifically proven reading instruction programmes’. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence both to support *Letterland* and to give rise to serious reservations about it. Unfortunately I am not aware of any scientific study where the results of the use of *Letterland* have been measured, analysed and compared with those of other teaching methods. At present the RRF can neither endorse nor reject *Letterland* on the basis of its results. However, the RRF also promotes ‘research-based principles of reading instruction’ and, consequently, methods that can be described as ‘synthetic phonics’ (see ‘Research and Links’ on www.r rf.org.uk). The extent to which *Letterland* fits with a description of synthetic phonics can be examined, and in the following paragraphs I have tried to do that.

- **Is *Letterland* truly a synthetic-phonics programme?**

There is an ongoing debate about the precise definition of synthetic phonics and the teaching principles involved. I shall use the definitions given by Lyn Wendon in her article and by the RRF on the website home page.

Lyn Wendon defines synthetic phonics as:

direct instruction that prioritises teaching children how to convert letters and letter combinations into sounds, how to segment them and how to blend them into meaningful words

I examined the *Teacher’s Guide* and the *Letterland Early Years Handbook* to find out if *Letterland* fits this description.

- **Does *Letterland* involve direct instruction?**

Yes. Every lesson involves direct instruction.

- **Does *Letterland* prioritise teaching children how to convert letters and letter combinations into sounds?**

Yes. Through *Letterland* characters and stories, priority is given to the sounds represented by letters and letter combinations. *Letterland* characters are also used to help children to remember what letters look like.

- **Does *Letterland* prioritise how to segment them [sounds] and how to blend them into meaningful words?**

This question is crucial and, because the answer is not immediately clear, I have gone into some detail in the following analysis. There is certainly scope for different teachers to follow the *Letterland Teacher's Guide* and vary greatly in the extent to which they make segmenting and blending a priority. Nevertheless, the *Guide* does emphasise some activities more than others.

A 'Reading Direction' sign and other activities are used to help children read words from left to right. The 'Lesson Plan Structure' in the Introduction contains the recommendations, 'build words from the seventh lesson', 'blend CVC/CCVC/CVCC words' and 'segment CVC/CCVC/CVCC words', which may imply the frequent inclusion of blending and segmenting in lessons.

However, in the 39 lesson plans in Section 1, segmenting is explicitly included in the main part of the Lesson Plan in only 10 lessons and blending in only 7. In contrast, every Lesson Plan explicitly includes instruction in initial letter sounds, and 25 Lesson Plans explicitly include flashcards for characters' names.

On the other hand, each lesson does direct the teacher to a range of other activities, and some of these, the 'Tricks' and the 'Activity Bank' activities, include blending and segmenting. If these blending and segmenting activities were to be included in all lessons, then *Letterland* could be said to prioritise blending and segmenting. Yet of the 8 'Tricks' there is only one, 'The Roller Coaster Trick', which is good for blending, and it is explicitly suggested in only one Lesson Plan. There is one 'Trick' good for segmenting, 'The Slow-Speed Trick', and it is explicitly suggested in 5 Lesson Plans. A choice of either the 'Alliteration Game' or an activity from the 'Activity Bank' is given in 24 Lesson Plans. Choosing the 'Activity Bank' involves a further choice of 19 activities, of which 4 involve blending and none involves segmenting. In contrast, the 'Character Names Trick', which involves no blending or segmenting, is suggested in 25 Lesson Plans. Ideas for individual activities include *Letterland* Reading Booklets and activities in Copymasters or Workbooks. The Reading Booklets include decodable words for blending, but also NLS high-frequency words and *Letterland* character names. The Copymasters and Workbooks include blending, but also whole words and other activities.

My conclusion is that the *Teacher's Guide* does not unambiguously prioritise segmenting and blending.

In the *Early Years Handbook*, which is designed for children before formal schooling, there is no mention of segmenting or blending.

The RRF description of synthetic phonics is:

1. *no initial sight vocabulary where words are learnt as whole shapes*
2. *emphasis on letter sounds (not names – learn names in the first instance through, for example, an alphabet song)*

3. *systematic, fast-paced, comprehensive introduction to letter/s-sound correspondence knowledge (e.g. six correspondences per week including vowels and consonants)*
 4. *putting the correspondence knowledge to immediate use with all-through-the-word blending for reading*
 5. *segmenting single-sound units all-through-the-spoken-word for spelling*
 6. *no guessing words from picture, context or initial letter cues.*
- **Does *Letterland* include an initial sight vocabulary where words are learned as whole shapes?**

In *Letterland* children are introduced to some whole words before they have been introduced to the letter/sound correspondences needed to decode them. Whether they are expected to learn these words ‘as whole shapes’ or in some other way is not made clear. In the *Teacher’s Guide Lesson Plans*, classroom labels and *Letterland* character names are to be used mainly to reinforce initial letter/sound correspondences. However, it is suggested that children read ‘My *Letterland* Reading Booklet’ and read and spell ‘Take-home Reading and Spelling Lists’, which include NLS high-frequency words and *Letterland* character names, before all the necessary letter/sound correspondences have been taught. Spelling lists begin at Lesson 3, but blending is not introduced until Lesson 7.

In the *Early Years Handbook*, children are encouraged to ‘read’ labels, when they have not been taught to blend letters.

- **Is the emphasis on letter sounds or letter names?**

The emphasis is undoubtedly on letter sounds and teachers are given clear advice about how to pronounce letter sounds accurately.

- **Is the introduction to letter/sound correspondence knowledge systematic and comprehensive?**

Yes. It begins with a one-to-one correspondence for each letter of the alphabet, and a ‘short’ and ‘long’ sound for the five vowel letters. Consonant digraphs are taught next, then several spelling alternatives for ‘long’ vowel sounds, and lastly spelling alternatives for the remaining vowel sounds. There is a further ‘advanced’ level, that introduces more spelling patterns.

- **Is it fast-paced?**

Letterland provides a number of different options for the pace of the introduction to letter/sound correspondences. Using the ‘Lesson Plan structure’, 73 letter/sound correspondences are taught in 83 to 88 lessons. With 5 lessons a week, that is an average rate of just over 4 correspondences a week. Another option in the 2003 Handbook is the ‘a-z Phonemic Awareness Fast Track’, which involves teaching one phoneme for each of the single letter a-z graphemes in 2 to 3 weeks, i.e. 9 to 13 correspondences a week at first. After that, teachers are to choose how to move on. One suggestion is to work through all the following lesson plans, which would result in an average rate of less than 4 a week. Another suggestion is to skip straight to Section 2, but only if the children ‘are already familiar with’ 13 correspondences that would not have been taught within the programme. This would involve a further 43 to 48 lessons, possibly resulting in only 9 weeks to introduce 60 correspondences, which is more than 6 correspondences a week. All of these options could result in a fast-paced introduction to letter/sound correspondences.

On the other hand, in the *Early Years Handbook* it is suggested that teachers focus on only one letter a week.

- **Is the correspondence knowledge put to immediate use with all-through-the-word blending for reading?**

Using the ‘Lesson Plan structure’, blending begins in Lesson 7, which could be regarded as almost immediately. Yet in spite of this, blending is not explicitly included in most of the following Lesson Plans. ‘Take-home Reading and Spelling Lists’ include a minority of ‘blending words’. So in the Lesson Plans, correspondence knowledge is put to immediate use with all-through-the-word blending, but, as indicated above, it is difficult to tell whether or not blending is expected to be practised in every lesson from the seventh onwards.

In neither the ‘Fast Track’ nor the *Early Years Handbook* is correspondence knowledge used for blending.

- **Does *Letterland* include segmenting single-sound units all-through-the-spoken-word for spelling?**

Segmenting sound units for spelling is explicitly included in 10 out of 25 lessons and in ‘Take-home Reading and Spelling Lists’.

- **Is guessing words from picture, context or initial letter cues encouraged?**

In most of the *Teacher’s Guide*, children are not asked to use picture or context cues. However, in almost every lesson plan it is suggested that they read ‘My *Letterland* Reading Booklet’. They are asked to illustrate these booklets and then reread the pages and ‘use their own illustrations to help them’. Children are constantly directed to look at the initial letters of *Letterland* characters’ names and classroom labels that have the same initial letters. One of the ‘tricks’ suggested is to use the initial capital letter to ‘help you to read all the *Letterlanders*’ names’.

In the *Early Years Handbook*, children are encouraged to ‘read’ labels ‘by knowing their place on the wall’. Guessing from context and initial letter cues is undoubtedly encouraged for some activities.

Other points that have been discussed

The use of *Letterland* characters and stories as mnemonics for letter/sound correspondences occurs not only in the initial stages. It is elaborate and central to the whole programme. I have no evidence, except anecdotal, to judge whether this is effective or not.

Letterland has whole sections devoted to teaching children about onset and rime and consonant blends. At first sight, this may not seem to fit in with a strict synthetic-phonics approach, but it is in fact not excluded by either of the definitions of synthetic phonics I have used. Furthermore, where the onset-rime is concerned, the main objection has usually been to its use instead of letter-sound decoding as the initial way in to reading, and this is not how it is used in *Letterland*.

Conclusion

There is no scientific research evidence available about the results of using *Letterland*, but there is research that shows that synthetic-phonics methods are more effective than methods that mix synthetic phonics and other word identification strategies. On this basis, the essential question is whether or not *Letterland* can be considered a synthetic-phonics programme.

Letterland is undoubtedly predominantly a phonics programme, and it includes many elements of synthetic phonics. It involves direct instruction and a systematic, fast-paced, comprehensive introduction to letter/sound correspondences. It introduces blending early on, and it explicitly includes blending and segmenting in some Lesson Plans.

Although *Letterland* includes the teaching of 'sight words' before all the letter/sound correspondences involved have been taught, there are other programmes considered to be synthetic phonics that also do this to some extent. Guessing from context and initial letter cues cannot be part of a synthetic-phonics approach, but it could be argued that this is a minor part of *Letterland*.

As with all programmes, different teachers interpret guidance in different ways. As a result, some might use *Letterland* more according to mixed methods, where phonics is only one of a number of cueing strategies, and others more according to the principles of synthetic phonics.

In spite of this, there is no doubt in my mind that the *Teacher's Guide* does not give blending, or 'synthesising', the unambiguous priority I would expect of a synthetic-phonics programme.

**I have referred to the 2003 Teacher's Guide, the 2004 Early Years Handbook, and the Letterland website, www.letterland.com.*

Editor's note:

New *Letterland* materials are about to be published. It would seem appropriate to delay further debate about this programme until these new materials are available and, more particularly, until the results of standardised tests and/or Key Stage 1 and 2 tests are available from schools using *Letterland* as it is intended to be used.

SNIPPET FROM THE 'OUR RIGHT TO READ' TRUST

The following is an e-mail received in February 2006 by Fiona Nevola, of the Our Right to Read Trust from a SENCO whom she trained in the Sound Reading System (SRS) last year. SRS is used as a catch-up for children and in a Young Offenders centre where 16 staff have recently completed SRS training.

'I have been working with a 47-year-old cleaner from our school, who could not read. She told me she was worried because her partner always read documents and completed forms for her, and he, being considerably older than her, might not always be around to do this. We embarked on a program as suggested by yourselves during our course, and to her great surprise, she began to read. This has only taken 8 hours and she is now reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. She is really excited and already has a reasonable comprehension of the story. I carried out a Schonell reading test with her two weeks ago and she scored a reading age of 11.7 (Not bad from 0!!)'

PHONICS: THE HOLY GRAIL OF READING?

Jennifer Chew

The following is the text of a talk given at the 'Battle of Ideas' conference organised by the Institute of Ideas on 30 October 2005. The organisers had chosen the title for this session and had asked the Queen's English Society to choose two speakers likely to represent different viewpoints. The other speaker was Prof. Kathy Hall, of the Open University, who is president-elect of the United Kingdom Literacy Association.

I want to use the handout to show that there are two dimensions to reading: one is decoding and the other is comprehending.

HANDOUT

Which of Texts 1, 2 and 3 can you read?

Text 1 (from 'Jabberwocky', by Lewis Carroll):

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Text 2 (Part of a letter written by a 50-year-old woman with severe learning difficulties):

I have been on boat trip harbour ocean. View for meal there Turkish apple tea for a nice meal out at the Café Restaurant..... I picked fruit by pushes railway track for Houses every Autumn Seasonal outside. View at the weekends area. I hope you have had a nice birthday greetings treat Happy days every year.

Text 3: (To be identified in due course)

in ðə laɪt əv ðə mu:n ə litl ɛg læɪ ɒn ə li:f. wʌn sʌndei mɔ:nɪŋ ðə
wɔ:m sʌn keɪm ʌp ænd pɒp! aʊt əv ði ɛg keɪm ə taɪni ænd veri
hʌŋgrɪ kætəpɪlə.

Phonics is concerned with the decoding dimension of reading: converting the black marks on the page into words spoken aloud or silently. The approach which teaches beginners to do this purely by converting letters into sounds and blending the sounds together has come to be called 'synthetic phonics': 'synthetic' because of the 'synthesising' element – once the separate sounds /c/-/a/-/t/ have been produced they need to be blended or synthesised into a seamless whole, 'cat'. This was the approach used in an experiment in Clackmannanshire in Scotland which produced very good results and had a lot of media coverage. It was apparently *The Scotsman* newspaper which first called phonics the 'holy grail of reading' in reporting on this project. I'll say more about this later.

Everyone agrees that comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, but the battle of ideas continues about whether a strong early emphasis on phonic decoding makes children better or worse at comprehension in the long term. What is clear is that although decoding does not guarantee comprehension, comprehension is impossible without decoding. This view is supported by research and common sense, and you were adopting it if you felt that you could 'read' texts 1 and 2 but not text 3 – this was because you could decode texts 1 and 2 (translate the black marks into words spoken aloud or silently) but could not decode text 3 unless you knew the International Phonetic Alphabet. It's the opening of a popular book for preschoolers: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. The words are 'In the light of the moon, a little egg

lay on a leaf. One Sunday morning the warm sun came up and pop! Out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar'. In terms of comprehension, Text 3 is much more straightforward than Texts 1 and 2, but one can't know this without decoding it.

Most of us regard ourselves as 'reading' if we can decode, but not if we can't. Of course we *want* to understand too if at all possible, but we accept that there are times when this may require extra effort. For now, I want to make the point that when children start school, decoding is the thing that most of them can't do. They are in the position that some of you were in with text 3: they can understand it if it's read aloud to them, but they don't yet have the decoding key which would allow them to do the whole job themselves. The top priority of synthetic-phonics teachers is to bring the children's decoding up to the level of their comprehension, and so they teach phonics first and fast to beginners. This does not mean that they neglect comprehension – it just means that they regard the children's existing comprehension level as sufficient for any reading they do at this stage. They begin by teaching the children to recognise letter-shapes and to produce sounds for them (starting with the simplest letter-sound correspondences), and teach them to blend those sounds together into recognisable words. A common procedure is to teach a few letter-sound correspondences at the rate of about one per day and to have the children decoding simple words made up of those correspondences within a few days of starting school. Thus they realise from the start that one identifies printed words from the letters in them. They then go on learning a letter and a sound per day. This soon gets them on to the sounds represented by letter-combinations such as 'sh' and 'ee', but they would not be expected to read texts containing the word 'sheep' until they had been taught these digraphs, whereas children taught by the more typical British approach would be expected to read such words by recognising them as wholes or guessing them from pictures or context. One teacher who *does* teach synthetic phonics recently received a report from the local authority language consultant on one of her pupils. This report stated 'He seems to be trying to sound out the words with some success, but without looking at the pictures for clues. He needs to be praised for giving a plausible word which fits in with the syntactic and picture clues without necessarily being the exact word'. This idea that a plausible word is as good as the exact word is very prevalent but surely wrong.

In practice, the synthetic-phonics approach enables children to make excellent progress, as has been shown in Clackmannanshire, where all the local authority primary schools participated in the project. Three groups of children were taught to read in different ways for just 16 weeks at the very beginning of their schooling. In the experimental group, the children were taught to read *all* words that they encountered by the synthetic-phonics approach – producing sounds for the letters and letter-groups and blending the sounds. The other groups in the project (the control groups) used an approach for reading in which they learnt words as wholes first and only then learnt to break them down into smaller units. This type of phonic analysis *after* words have been identified in some other way is common throughout the UK. After the 16-week programme (that's all it takes to lay these foundations), the synthetic-phonics group was so far ahead in reading and spelling that it was considered unethical to withhold the programme from the other children. They were then given the programme and the results were reported for the group as a whole from then on. No further special teaching took place, but by the time the children left primary school nearly seven years later, their word-reading ability was three and a half years above the average for their age – their comprehension was only three and half months above average, but even that was very good, as I hope to show. Their spelling was 20 months above average. I'm not supposed to be talking about spelling today, but it is a pet subject of mine and it's closely related to reading. The Clackmannanshire experiment suggests

that when beginners are taught word-reading and spelling as mirror-images of each other, each powerfully reinforces the other and both benefit.

Despite its good results, this kind of approach for beginners is still treated with some suspicion in British schools. One reason is that there is a widespread belief that beginners naturally start by recognising words as wholes. A leading teacher-trainer has written, 'Initially, whatever we try to teach them, young children recognise words as unanalysed wholes, making no attempt to map the component letters into speech sounds' (Henrietta Dombey, Professor of Language and Literacy at Brighton University, in an article in *Literacy Today* in 1999). The fact is, however, that beginners *can* map letters on to speech sounds if taught to do so – this is how reading is routinely taught in many non-English-speaking countries. 16 weeks of such teaching in Clackmannanshire put the experimental group significantly ahead of the children taught to recognise words as wholes – this should not have happened if whole-word recognition is more natural for beginners. The problem is that most teachers are not trained to teach synthetic phonics – rather, they are trained to teach children to identify words as wholes, often by looking for clues in the pictures and context.

So the belief that beginners can process written words only as unanalysed wholes is one reason why phonics has not been favoured – but it's a mistaken belief. Another reason is that an early emphasis on phonics is suspected of making children think that reading stops with decoding, and that *understanding* what they read is not important. This brings us on to the matter of comprehension. As we saw from text 3, if we can't decode we can't understand, so decoding is an important first step. There can be two main outcomes of competent decoding: one is that we understand as we decode, which is what happens with simple texts, and the other is that the decoding makes us realise that we have *not* understood, or not understood fully. As proficient readers, we *do* encounter texts that we don't fully understand as we first decode them. But it is the decoding which gives us hints about what to do in order to increase our understanding. For example, we may need to look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary, or tussle with complicated sentence-structure. Or we may realise that however hard we try, a particular text will remain beyond our comprehension. But all this arises only with difficult texts, and these are not the texts we are talking about in connection with young children. Rather, we are talking about texts such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*: if children understand this as an adult reads it aloud to them, they will understand it if they can decode well enough to read it to themselves. It is only *later* that they will start encountering texts where decoding may not yield instant comprehension – but if they have not actually decoded the words accurately, how will they know whether they need to consult a dictionary or to grapple with syntax?

I said I would return to the matter of the Clackmannanshire children comprehending, by the end of primary school, only three and a half months above the average for their age whereas they were three and a half *years* above average in word-reading. This seems a big discrepancy. But bear in mind that decoding is a simple mechanical skill which can be managed even by people with severe learning difficulties, though they often do not understand what they read – this point was made by Prof. Margaret Snowling, of York University, in a recent Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme on dyslexia. By contrast, good comprehension depends on vocabulary, general knowledge and intelligence. As a group, the Clackmannanshire children were from the most deprived 10% of the population, a factor likely to depress vocabulary and general knowledge to some extent. Children from this sort of background would typically score not just below but *far* below the national average in comprehension, but the Clackmannanshire children scored significantly *above* the national average. This means that they comprehended better than children who had been taught more whole-

word recognition and guessing from pictures and context, as the test had been standardised on a representative sample of children taught by this typical British approach.

How did children from the most deprived 10% of the population manage to comprehend significantly better than average children whose teachers had emphasised reading for meaning more and decoding less? Bear in mind that reading for meaning is commonly taught in the way suggested by the language consultant quoted above: children are taught to guess at words from pictures and context rather than to decode them accurately. This is surely not the best way of fostering comprehension. The Clackmannanshire teachers started by putting much more emphasis on accurate decoding, and found that as the children grew older, they could manage more advanced work than previous cohorts had done – the strong decoding start had evidently helped rather than hindered their comprehension.

To sum up: phonics is the holy grail of reading in the sense that it teaches decoding very systematically and decoding opens the way for comprehension. Decoding allows instant comprehension when texts are easy, and it allows readers to decide what other steps might assist comprehension when texts are difficult. So if comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, teaching children to decode efficiently is a very good first step, according to both research and common sense.

SNIPPET FROM *THE SUNDAY TIMES*

On 19 February 2006, Minette Marrin wrote that the National Audit Office had reported, in the autumn of 2004, that most school leavers lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills.

SNIPPET FROM *THE TIMES EDUCATIONAL SUPPLEMENT*

The *TES* is often not pro-phonics, but an editorial on 3 February 2006 contained the following statement:

‘There is more solid research evidence to support the use of phonics at the start of young children’s reading instruction than there ever was to back up the literacy hour.’

FAST PHONICS FIRST

Fast Phonics First, by Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson, is about to be published by Heinemann. This is the programme used in the Clackmannanshire study.

MARILYN JAGER ADAMS ON 'THE THREE-CUEING SYSTEM'

Geraldine Carter

Geraldine Carter comments on a chapter with the above title by Marilyn Jager Adams which appeared in a book called *Literacy for All*, edited by Jean Osborn and Fran Lehr and published in 1998 by the Guilford Press. The whole chapter can be found at <http://www.balancedreading.com/3cue-adams.html>. What Adams has to say is particularly relevant in view of the debate about the National Literacy Strategy's 'searchlights'.

There is little doubt that the pivotal role given by the NLS to the ambitious four-cueing 'searchlights' model for early reading played a crucial part in persuading educationalists to accept phonics. Phonics for many in the Education Establishment represents a functional skill-and-drill apparatus, an interloper imposing a crude technical primitivism on their sophisticated and sensitive reading-for-meaning construct. The Reading Reform Foundation's explanations of how and why a Searchlights strategy is a hydra-like obstacle confusing many beginner readers, have fallen on deaf ears. In addition, the NLS model has detracted from the necessary focus on phonics for beginner readers, many of whom have been denied the kind of overlearning necessary to absorb the written language code. The NLS has made some adjustments, but has failed to remove its damaging four-cue 'searchlight' instruction. NLS officials say that this construct 'lies at the heart of the NLS' and that it is based on the sound research foundations of the American educator Marilyn Jager Adams.

However, Marilyn Jager Adams's essay 'The Three-Cueing System' dynamites this whole argument. In a fascinating investigation of the genesis of the 'three-cue' schema and its subsequent misinterpretation, the author examines in the context of the American scene how and why the original model has been corrupted. Unfortunately it is this rogue model that has seduced the NLS and which the DfES has cascaded down to well over 20,000 schools.

For RRF members – synthetic-phonics researchers, practitioners and programme makers – the essay is a vindication of their trenchant criticism of this, the most pernicious aspect of all NLS instruction. If Jim Rose fails to grasp the nettle, the long tail of reading failure will continue.

Near the start of her essay, Adams quotes Stanovich (1993): 'To the extent that children do read, they generally do learn new words, new meanings, new linguistic structures, and new modes of thought through reading', adding that 'the wisdom of the popular dictum, that reading is best learned through reading, follows directly'. Next follows a caution: 'Where children find reading too difficult, they very often will not do it'. She adds, 'Well into the middle grades, children's ability to understand text that is read aloud to them significantly exceeds their ability to understand the same text when reading on their own (Curtis, 1980). The bulk of this difference is traced to their difficulties in reading the words. Moreover poorly-developed word recognition skills are the most pervasive and debilitating source of reading difficulty (Adams, 1990; Perfetti, 1985; Share & Stanovich, 1995).'

Educationists might do well to ponder her statement: 'Words, as it turns out, are the raw data of text. It is the words of a text that evoke the starter set of concepts and relationships from which its meaning must be built. Research has shown that for skilful readers, and regardless of the difficulty of the text, the basic dynamic of reading is line by line, left-to-right, and word by word. It is because skilful readers are able to recognize words so quickly that they can take in text at rates of approximately five words per second or nearly a full type-written page per minute. It is because their capacity for word recognition is so overlearned and effortless that it proceeds almost

automatically, feeding rather than competing with comprehension processes.’ And she emphatically notes: ‘Most surprising of all, research teaches us that what enables this remarkably swift and efficient capacity to recognize words is the skilful readers’ deep and ready knowledge of the words’ spellings and spelling-speech correspondences.’

In an audacious rejection of synthetic-phonics practice, the NLS/DfES has continued thus far to draw everyone into the web of its searchlights reading-for-meaning instruction as the primary tool for beginning readers. And so the hapless child must continue to use a range of context clues, picture clues, beginning letter clues, shape-of-word clues, ‘sight’ reading knowledge, inference, *and* decoding skills.

The Significance of the Three-Cueing System

In a fascinating exploration of the origin of three-cueing schema and its subsequent interpretation, Adams exposes the misconceptions that grew, fungus-like and unchallenged. She became convinced that the three-cueing system was not represented in ‘mainstream academic repertoire’.

Adams’s preoccupation is not with the schematic per se but with interpretations ‘so broadly attached’ to it. And here she gets to the root of the problem: ‘First, the three-cueing schematic is sometimes presented as rationale for subordinating the value of the graphophonemic information to syntax and semantics and, by extension, for minimizing and even eschewing attention to the teaching, learning, and use of the graphophonemic system’. She goes on to note that ‘more importantly in the context of instructional guidance for teachers and school districts, such marginalization of the role of spelling-to-speech correspondences is alarmingly discrepant with what research has taught us about the knowledge and processes involved in learning to read’.

While the NLS team protests that phonics instruction plays an increasingly important part in its developing programme, any sensitive teacher is aware that a failing child is likely to choose guessing as the number one option. And it is that very confidence, squeezed out of him by mal-instruction that is likely to leave him confused and demoralised. The confidence initially instilled in him by mal-instruction is quickly squeezed out of him as he finds that it is misplaced and is left confused and demoralised, unable to handle the multi-cueing searchlight options.

The Demise of the Graphophonemic System

Adams considers Don Holdaway to be the most likely source of the view that readers get only a small amount of information from letters and that this need entail ‘no necessary phonic involvement’ (his words in a 1979 book). She reproduces an exercise designed by him to demonstrate this, but as she points out, ‘the knowledge and processes he leads us to use...are not remotely available to the beginning reader’. Regie Routman, a prominent USA author, acknowledges Holdaway’s influence. She includes a three-cueing diagram in books published in 1988 and 1994, and expresses her conviction that ‘children learn phonics best *after* they can already read’. In her 1994 book, she writes, ‘While phonics is integral to the reading process, it is subordinate to semantics and syntax.’ In the same book, she provides a reproducible letter to parents on ‘Ways to help your child with reading at home’ in which, as Adams says, ‘Phonics truly seems the last resort’. Adams concludes that whatever the source of the three-cueing idea, ‘this attitude about the disruptiveness of phonics and its instruction is one that is very broadly held in the field’.

In 1998, the very same year that the Adams critique was published, England saw the introduction of the NLS. Perhaps the ‘demise’ process is a little more subtle in the UK than in the USA. In collecting ‘renditions’ of the three-cueing system in the USA, Adams came across several ‘boldly headed with the admonition: “Let’s all work

together to avoid the phrase, ‘sound it out!’” In the UK, the NLS policy seems to be to allow phonics teaching as long as it is enmeshed with searchlights and provided that synthetic phonics is never implemented with a proper understanding of how it works. In the conclusion of this section Adams states categorically: ‘Poorly developed knowledge or facility with spellings and spelling-sound correspondences is the most pervasive cause of reading delay or disability (Rack et al. 1992, Stanovich, 1986). Research further demonstrates that, with the exception of no more than 1-3% of children, reading disability can be prevented through well-designed, early instruction (Vellutino et al.1996)’. Should the backlash against synthetic phonics prove effective, we will be stuck with a figure approaching 20%.

The Diminution of the Other Cueing System

Adams here focuses on the approach to instruction on text cues. ‘Given that the principal argument for the de-emphasis of phonics instruction has been that children are in greater need of developing their sensitivity to the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic cues of text, one might expect an attendant surge in the amount and rigour of instruction on the latter. Yet, quite the opposite has happened.’ Although comprehension is held to be all-important, comprehension strategies are not actually being taught. Anyone concerned with the teaching of literacy to older children would do well to study Adams’s arguments about the importance of extending children’s knowledge of ‘the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic cues involved in skilful reading’, but, again, these do not impinge on beginning reading instruction. They do, however, shed light on the all-pervasive and illogical approach to literacy running through our approach to reading instruction like letters seared through seaside rock.

Summary

In Adams’s damning words: ‘If the intended message of the three-cueing system was originally that teachers should take care not to overemphasize phonics to the neglect of comprehension, its received message has broadly become that teachers should minimize attention to phonics lest it compete with comprehension. If the original premise of the system was that the reason for reading the words is to understand the text, it has since been oddly converted such that, in effect, the reason for understanding the text is in order to figure out the words. How did this happen?’

And, finally: ‘The simplifications and distortions that the three-cueing system has suffered are uncharacteristic of the fate of written information. My hypothesis is, instead, that the three-cueing system principally has proliferated through in-service sessions, workshops, and conferences, and that it is through that process that its interpretation has been changed and its heritage forgotten...the sobering revelation of this story is the profound breach in information and communication that separates the teaching and research communities. In the world of practice, the widespread subscription to the belief system that the three-cueing diagram has come to represent has wreaked disaster on students and hardship on teachers...’.