

Newsletter no. 58

Summer term 2006

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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 November 2006. Please send articles **no later than the end of September**, by e-mail to jennifer@chew8.freemove.co.uk or by post to Mrs J. Chew, The Mount, Malt Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20 9PB. Please note that subscriptions should no longer be sent to this address – see form inside back cover.

EDITORIAL

Jim Rose's final report, *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading*, was published in March 2006 and lived up to the promise of the interim report published in November 2005. The RRF congratulates Jim Rose and his team on the good sense of their conclusions and the carefully reasoned way in which these conclusions are presented. Our response to the final report is printed in this Newsletter.

It is clear, however, that not everyone accepts the Rose recommendations, and there is continuing resistance to the idea that synthetic phonics is the best approach for beginners. A study published by the Department for Education and Skills early in 2006 and intended to inform the Rose review concluded that there was no research showing definitely that synthetic phonics was better than analytic phonics (Torgerson, Brooks and Hall: *A Systematic Review of the Research Literature on the Use of Phonics in the Teaching of Reading and Spelling*). There are problems with this study, however, as is clear from a critique by Prof. Diane McGuinness, one of our RRF committee members, which is briefly summarised in this Newsletter (but available in full on the RRF website) and from comments gleaned from elsewhere. It also needs to be stressed that even if Torgerson et al. are correct in saying that the research in favour of synthetic phonics is inconclusive, the other side of the coin is that the research in favour of other kinds of phonics, including the kind embodied in the National Strategy, is also inconclusive. Jim Rose's very reasonable solution was to trust his own observations. These convinced him that the case for synthetic phonics was very strong.

A month or so after the final Rose report came out, a draft framework was sent to schools for consultation. The RRF understanding was that this framework was supposed to reflect the Rose recommendations. Frustratingly, however, it was Year 3, not Reception, which was chosen to exemplify the detailed guidance in the framework, so the consultation period came and went with the detail for Reception remaining an unknown quantity. This seems very odd, given that the Rose report is about *early* reading and should bring about greater changes in Reception than anywhere else. Is it possible that those drafting the framework still have not grasped a point which was clearly made in both the interim and final reports of the Rose team: that the initial stage of learning to read is very different from the kind of reading which children do once they can read? The RRF response to the draft framework is included in this Newsletter.

We can only hope that the version of the literacy framework which is finalised between now and September 2006 will be faithful to the Rose report in its guidance on early reading. There should be no alternative: the Rose report has been accepted in full by the government and if the new framework is not faithful to it, the government's intentions will not have been fulfilled.

And now an important announcement: the RRF will be holding a conference on 3 November 2006 at Birkbeck College in London. We are delighted that Jim Rose has agreed to speak. Please see inside the back cover of this Newsletter for further information.

Jennifer Chew

The following was published on the RRF website in March 2006. A copy was also sent to Jim Rose, who expressed his approval of it.

**A RESPONSE BY THE READING REFORM FOUNDATION TO
JIM ROSE'S FINAL REPORT:
*INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE TEACHING OF EARLY READING***

The Reading Reform Foundation warmly welcomes this report, which was published on 20 March 2006. We believe that Jim Rose and his team have dealt very clearly and fairly with the issues. The following headings are not all from the report itself, but reflect areas of particular interest to the RRF.

The searchlights model and the relationship between decoding and comprehension

1. A highlight of the report is the way it deals with the relationship between decoding and comprehension and, in the process, exposes the weaknesses in the 'searchlights' model which has always been at the heart of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) *Framework for Teaching*. The report states that at the time the searchlights model was introduced in 1998, it 'encapsulated what was considered to be "best practice" in the teaching of reading. This offered the opportunity, which the NLS has fully exploited, of gradually increasing the emphasis on the importance of phonics for young and for struggling readers'. The implication may be that the original NLS authors knew that what was considered to be 'best practice' at the time was *not* in fact best practice (there was already plenty of research showing this), but went along with it because challenging it too openly might have reduced the chances of having some phonics on the agenda from the start and then gradually increasing the amount.

2. Whatever the reasons for the placing of the searchlights model at the heart of the NLS, the Rose report has now shown convincingly that this model is inappropriate for beginners. There is a section on this in the body of the report (paragraphs 113-130) but the most detailed reasoning is in Appendix 1, which is by Professors Morag Stuart and Rhona Stainthorp. They show how the 'searchlights' model has confused 'word recognition' and 'language comprehension', and they present the case, complete with numerous research references, for explicitly delineating the role played by each. They refer to the 'simple view of reading' proposed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986, which is that 'Reading is the product of decoding and comprehension'. By 'comprehension', here, Gough and Tunmer mean comprehension of spoken language. Stuart and Stainthorp point out that 'when children begin to learn to read, they have already made considerable progress in their language development. They already understand much of what is said to them and can express themselves so that others can understand them. They have not been "taught" language. *However, the time limited task that is word reading is generally achieved as a result of direct instruction*' (italics original). In other words, what beginners need above all is not to be taught to understand language (they can already do that) but to be taught to decode. The concept of learning word-reading skills as being a 'time-limited' task is a very useful one which surfaces several times in the Rose report. People need to realise that if phonic word-reading skills are taught first and fast, decoding quickly becomes automatic and children can devote their conscious attention more fully to the meaning of what they read.

Prevention rather than cure

3. The Rose report rightly points out that ‘quality first teaching’ can greatly reduce the number of children who fall behind, commenting, ‘Wave 1 teaching needs to be strengthened before any intervention programme is considered’ (para. 142), and ‘It is not the purpose of intervention work to shore up weak teaching at Wave 1’ (Recommendations, p. 71). It also stresses the importance of ensuring that interventions dovetail well with first-time classroom teaching: ‘effective intervention work should focus on the phonic skills children have already met in their mainstream classes but may need more help and time from skilled adults to strengthen and secure those aspects they had not first understood’ (para. 153). This should surely mean that intervention programmes such as Early Literacy Support and Reading Recovery are abandoned, as they encourage strategies (for example guessing at words from pictures and context) which will not fit in with the type of first-time teaching recommended by Rose. The same applies to the Early Reading Development Pilot which the DfES was running during the period in which the Rose review was in progress, although this was intended for mainstream use rather than for intervention.

Assessment

4. The report states, ‘Good assessment should track performance in all four strands of language: speaking, listening, reading and writing, and identify strengths and weakness in children’s knowledge, skills and understanding, especially those related to mastering word recognition skills’ (para. 59). In para. 61, it praises schools which were observed assessing

- recognition of letters (and groups of letters, such as digraphs)
- the ability to sound out phonemes
- the ability to hear and blend phonemes
- the reading of phonically regular words
- the reading of some irregular words.

Conversely, it criticises schools where gaps were found in assessment: for example, one where it ‘was not possible to find out, from records, whether an individual pupil could sound out and blend specific phonemes, could segment the sounds in words to spell or knew the different ways of writing specific phonemes – the fundamental building blocks for learning to read and write independently’ (para. 234). The implication, we hope, is that while children are still learning the ‘building blocks’, assessment focusing on these will supersede miscue analysis and running records, which do not focus nearly sharply enough on these building blocks.

Blending

5. The Rose report comments that ‘nearly half the schools visited did not give enough time to teaching children the crucial skill of blending (synthesising) sounds together. Instead, teachers emphasised hearing and identifying the initial, final and then the middle sounds in words. So, even when children knew sufficient letter-sound correspondences, their lack of skill in blending sounds meant that they could not apply their knowledge to read words they had not seen before’ (para. 232 – see also para. 237). This goes to the heart of the difference between synthetic phonics and the NLS approach which has been in force until now. The NLS approach over-emphasises the *hearing* side of phonics and does this in a way (initial, then final, then middle sounds in words) which is at odds with the order in which letters need to be looked at and sounds need to be produced in word-reading. By contrast, synthetic phonics teaches children to look at letters from left to right

and produce sounds for them, leaving them with the sounds in the right order for blending (synthesising). The blending of letter-prompted sounds is essential for reading words which are unfamiliar in their written form (as most words are to children in the early stages of learning to read). It is essential, too, if a programme is to be called ‘synthetic phonics’.

Decodable texts

6. Although the report does not come down firmly in favour of allowing children to practise for a while on decodable texts, it *does* say that there is ‘some force’ in the view that this is desirable as children can ‘benefit from “quick wins” in practising phonics skills and gaining confidence in reading a whole, albeit short, book. Using such books as part of the phonics programme does not preclude other reading. Indeed it can be shown that such books help children develop confidence and an appetite for reading more widely’ (para. 82). It is good to have the Rose team recognising these things, and also recognising that decodable books of good quality are now available.

Letter-names

7. The report suggests that there is no good reason why children should not be taught the names as well as the sounds of letters at an early stage. Synthetic phonics teachers agree that many children cope well with this, but find that the weaker ones can be confused by it and would therefore argue in favour of delaying the introduction of letter-names at least until digraphs are introduced, which is usually within the first half-term.

Training for teachers

8. The Rose report recognises that current training ‘is not always as effective as it should be’ (para. 176). It quotes comments from an Ofsted survey (para. 179) and from a new Initial Teacher Training tutor (para. 182) to the effect that training in how to teach phonics has been particularly weak. Ensuring that both initial and in-service training are much better in future is clearly essential but will not be easy in view of the large numbers of trainers who still find the multi-cueing ‘searchlights’ type of approach attractive.

Research and common sense

9. Where directly applicable research findings were felt to be inconclusive,¹ the team decided that observation based on common sense was a reasonable guide: ‘While robust research findings must not be ignored, developers of national strategies, much less schools and settings, cannot always wait for the results of long-term research studies. They must take decisions, based on as much firm evidence as is available from a range of sources at the time, especially from replicable and sustainable best practice’ (para. 31); ‘...notwithstanding the uncertainties of research, there is much convincing evidence to show from the practice observed that, as generally understood, “synthetic” phonics is the form of systematic phonic work that offers the vast majority of beginners the best route to becoming skilled readers’ (para. 47). The report comments, ‘Among other strengths, this is because it teaches children directly what they need to know.’ The RRF would endorse this: synthetic phonics explicitly teaches beginners grapheme-phoneme correspondences and the exact way in which they need to use them for reading – they need to produce

¹ Note that research findings might have been more conclusive if the Department for Education and Skills had played its own part by being more rigorous about conducting proper pilot studies before introducing programmes (for example *Progression in Phonics*, *Early Literacy Support* and *Playing with Sounds*) and about monitoring the outcomes of these programmes once they were implemented. The tendency of the DfES to be unscientific seems to be ongoing: even its latest initiative, the Early Reading Development Pilot (due to run until July 2006), would not meet rigorous research criteria.

sounds in response to letters and then blend the sounds together (i.e. synthesise them) into normally-spoken words. Synthetic phonics teachers also teach spelling, at least at first, as the other side of the same coin: they teach children to segment spoken words into phonemes and write down letters for the phonemes. The Rose report, too, recognises that it makes good sense to teach the ‘reversibility’ of reading and spelling (see paragraphs 44, 217, 221).

10. The same common-sense and observation-based approach is used to deal with some objections often raised to teaching phonics systematically to beginners – for example, that such teaching is too ‘formal’, that early systematic phonics leads to negative attitudes to reading, and that ‘one size does not fit all’. The Rose team found that the synthetic phonics teaching which they observed was not ‘formal’ in a bad sense: ‘the best work was formalised in design but taught creatively and with due regard for individual differences in, for example, children’s rates of learning’ (para. 50). They found that the children actually ‘showed positive attitudes to reading and writing’ (para. 36). On the ‘one size does not fit all’ point, they comment that ‘all beginner readers have to come to terms with the same alphabetic principles if they are to learn to read and write’ and that ‘leading edge practice bears no resemblance to a “one size fits all” model of teaching and learning, nor does it promote boringly dull rote learning of phonics’ (para. 34).

The next steps (April to September 2006)

11. It is very encouraging that Jim Rose and his team have seen good synthetic phonics in action: they have realised how well it works with beginners and how groundless the objections are that are commonly raised to it. We must now wait to see whether the draft of the revised framework for teaching, due out soon after Easter, is faithful to the Rose report. If it is not, we must say so during the consultation period. The RRF believes that if the Rose report is properly heeded in both the revised framework and in the training which teachers receive from now onwards, improvements in reading and spelling standards should be noticeable within a year.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

France, like Britain, has been heavily influenced by the sight-word and whole-language approaches, but the French education authorities, like their British counterparts, now want a return to phonics teaching. In January 2006, Dick Schutz drew attention on the RRF message-board to official statements made by the French Minister for National Education, Higher Education and Research. These statements emphasised the need to teach systematic phonics and the dangers of the ‘global method’. People familiar with the French education system say that the ‘global method’ is a sight-word/look-and-say approach rather than pure whole language, but clearly whole language also plays a part. The following translated extracts illustrate the French minister’s stance.

‘The global method still exists.’ It relies on ‘quasi-photographic recognition of words’, overloading children’s memories. ‘The global method is believed to have disappeared 30 years ago, but the mixed method which has replaced it is very often applied using “global” guiding principles, giving little or no importance to systematic training in grapheme-phoneme correspondences.’ ‘The reading of words has nothing to do with guessing’ and should not be ‘un exercice de devinette’ – this can be translated literally as ‘a riddle exercise’ but two people fluent in French (one a native French speaker) have, independently of each other, suggested that ‘a guessing game’ is more apt, despite neither having heard of Ken Goodman. The ‘guessing game’ approach may or may not be associated directly with Goodman in France, but it is clearly well known.

‘The children who decipher [*décryptent*] the best at the beginning learn the most quickly and the best later on; decoding [*décodage*] is the *sine qua non* condition of reading’ (quoted from Liliane Springer-Charolles, a researcher). ‘Contrary to what has been drummed into teachers for 30 years, it is not the fact of deciphering [*déchiffrer*] that is responsible for reading which is impoverished in getting access to meaning, but it is deficits in oral vocabulary which hinder the child from accessing [meaning]’ (quoted from Alain Bentolila, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Paris V). ‘In particular, [global methods] present a real risk to the most vulnerable children, or those with least support at home: that of falling into difficulties which then become insurmountable in acquiring the alphabet code.’ ‘But, you will say to me, 80% of pupils succeed in learning to read. Yes, but it’s the remaining 20% who worry me.’

‘I ask teachers to use methods which start with the “basics” [*éléments*] and allow children methodically to make the connection between the written form of a letter and the sound which it gives.’ ‘Researchers in France and elsewhere are in agreement: learning to read proceeds via decoding and the identification of words to their comprehension.’ ‘It is necessary that the pupil identifies the sounds of the French language at the same time as the relationship which connects them to corresponding letters and groups of letters. He will then understand that letters encode sound, not meaning.’ ‘The automatising of the recognition of written words necessitates systematic exercises in the connection between letters and sounds and will not result from the committing to memory of a photographic image of words which characterises the global approach to reading.’

The Minister appealed for the co-operation of teachers and teacher-trainers in implementing his new directives.

SYNTHETIC PHONICS IN THE CARIBBEAN

Elizabeth Nonweiler

In March 2006, the RRF received an enquiry from a Caribbean island about synthetic phonics. Elizabeth Nonweiler, one of our committee members, arranged to go there in June. Below are some comments which she made before, during and after her visit.

Before: Next week I shall be far away on a beautiful Caribbean island, but it’s not for the scenery and sunshine. I’m going to meet Mrs Niles, the Education Officer for Carriacou and Petit Martinique, and some of the teachers there. Together we are going to plan a project to improve literacy in the islands’ schools by introducing synthetic phonics teaching methods. Mrs Niles is well informed, and some of the teachers have already read Diane McGuinness’s book, *Why Our Children Can’t Read*, and are excited about the methods.

It all began in March, when the Reading Reform Foundation was approached about the possibility of setting up this project, and it has snowballed from there. Other RRF colleagues hope to join me when we go there again later this year to provide training.

Carriacou and Petit Martinique are part of the state of Grenada. Carriacou is seven by three miles and the total population is about six thousand people. It has five primary schools, two secondary schools and one sixth form college. Petit Martinique is a tiny island and has one primary school. Most of the time the weather is wonderful – warm and sunny – but they have suffered from hurricanes and there isn’t much money to spare for education. Our project depends on donations. We’ve already been given some teaching resources and some money towards covering expenses, but we need more.

By the time this newsletter has been distributed, my initial visit will be over. I'll keep in touch and let you know about the progress of the project. Now I must think about packing, resources, notes to take ... and get ready to go!

During: I'm here in Carriacou!

I met Mrs Niles, the Education Officer for Carriacou and Petit Martinique, on Monday. After an hour talking with her, the schools' counsellor, and an American linguist who used to teach at a local school, the British High Commissioner (I'm not sure I have her title correct) arrived on the boat – her first visit to Carriacou – and discussed the possibility of providing funding for the project.

On Tuesday I gave a two-hour talk to all the school principals and the heads of English. They are all well informed and interested. One principal in particular asked very searching questions, for instance, about abandoning a sight vocabulary and not teaching consonant blends. At first I thought she was hostile, but then I realised she was simply listening and thinking clearly about the consequences of changing. Mrs Niles is enthusiastic and determined to encourage change in all her schools.

Since then I've been visiting the schools. It seems to me that the situation at present is very similar to the best mixed-strategies schools in England. The problems are also similar. I've listened to children read. Some read fluently; some clearly can't, but don't want me to know. One little girl appeared to be reading a story fluently with wonderful expression, but suddenly she stopped, looked confused, and then started again – no relation to the print – she'd memorised the rest!

To summarise, the people I have met who are responsible for education here are critical and thoughtful about the issues, but also enthusiastic and willing to change the teaching of reading on all the schools on the island to synthetic phonics.

I'm having a truly wonderful time. I feel very privileged.

After: It's all go for training at the end of August. Susan Godsland and Maggie Downie are coming to help with training; Geraldine Carter has offered to come and write an article about the project. Money has been raised so far to cover some of our travel, and Eileen, who first contacted Debbie, is providing her house for free accommodation. There are more ideas in the pipeline.

The person who makes the decisions about education on Carriacou and Petit Martinique is the Education Officer, Mrs Niles. I spent more time with her than with anyone else. She is determined to have all the schools using synthetic-phonics teaching methods. The principals and teachers I spoke to are also very willing to try. I felt by the questions and responses of those who attended my 'workshop' (a two-hour explanation of synthetic phonics teaching methods) that they understand fairly well what is involved. The teachers of the youngest children didn't attend the workshop, although I did meet some of them later. Their training before next term will be especially important. However, the secondary school teachers are also keen that we train them to help their weak readers. Several of the teachers mentioned that common problem of mixed strategies – children who seem to be learning to read without problems until they hit Grade 3 or 4 (our Years 4/5) and then can't read well enough after all.

Although standards in reading and writing did not seem to me to be very different from here, their facilities and materials are far less. Teachers are paid directly from local government, and I was told they have to raise money for everything else – upkeep of buildings, materials, etc. The British High Commissioner gave me the impression that the

British High Commission will help financially, providing I write a good enough project proposal. She emphasised that the project must be ‘sustainable’. As I understand it, this means they want teachers trained in such a way that they will train others, they want the proposal to cover several years (whether I’m involved or not), and they want plans for it to spread to other parts of the Grenadine Islands. I found someone to advise me about headings for the proposal.

I now need to get on with the project proposal, planning the training, deciding how to assess children and communicating with all involved. I think of it as a Reading Reform Foundation project and I welcome comments and advice from all of you.

If Newsletter readers would like to contribute to this very deserving and exciting project, cheques made out to the Reading Reform Foundation can be sent to Eileen Measey, Nine Hills Cottage, Offchurch, near Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, CV33 9AQ.

**PROF. DIANE MCGUINNESS COMMENTS ON A REPORT BY
C. TORGERSON, G. BROOKS AND J. HALL:
‘A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH LITERATURE ON THE
USE OF PHONICS IN THE TEACHING OF READING AND SPELLING’**

In the summer of 2005, it was announced that the government had commissioned this review by Torgerson et al. and that Jim Rose would have the opportunity to draw on it (see the government’s response to the Education and Skills Committee’s report ‘Teaching Children to Read’). The review was published in January 2006. Diane McGuinness’s comments on it can be read in full at www.rrf.org.uk.

Prof. McGuinness writes that the Torgerson et al. review ‘purports to be a reworking of the National Reading Panel’s report in the US (2000) or, more accurately, the reading committee chair’s report of the same data (Ehri et al., 2001)’. ‘The reality is that every statement under the heading “Key Findings” [in the Torgerson et al. review] is incorrect or seriously compromised by the true facts.’ She points out that ‘there are enormous difficulties with meta-analysis research’ of this type and that ‘without great care researchers can combine apples and oranges’, producing studies in which ‘variables are too dissimilar to be combined’. For a number of reasons, ‘studies on remedial tutoring and early classroom instruction cannot be compared directly and certainly should not be included in the same meta-analysis. This precaution was not taken by the NRP committee nor by Torgerson et al.’

Furthermore, Prof. McGuinness comments that the Torgerson et al. decision to include studies that were not peer-reviewed is unacceptable: ‘peer-reviewed material is absolutely paramount to doing research of this type’. She is also critical of the excessive weight attached to ‘random assignment to experimental and control groups’, pointing out that this is not practical ‘given the basic reality of how schools work’. Finally, she criticises the authors for stating that they found 14 studies which included ‘comparisons between synthetic phonics and analytic phonics’. She herself ‘could only find one’.

In private discussion, others have expressed similar concern about the Torgerson et al. review, for example criticising its inclusion of an unpublished study by Skailand dating from 1971. In this study, children were trained on pairs of words such as ‘tap’ and ‘tape’, so 50% of the words were ‘silent e’ words, which are not appropriate for early synthetic phonics teaching.

READING REFORM FOUNDATION RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING LITERACY CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

The Reading Reform Foundation (RRF) finds this document extremely disappointing. It was issued in April 2006 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), but makes little attempt to incorporate the findings of the Rose *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* of March 2006, which it was surely supposed to do. The Rose report, also published by the DfES, focuses firmly on *early* reading in a way which the DfES draft framework fails to do. In particular, the draft framework is virtually silent on the following key points, which are clearly made in the Rose report. References are to this report unless otherwise indicated.

- Phonics is ‘a body of knowledge, skills and understanding that...has to be taught and learned’. Learning to read differs from and precedes reading to learn (para. 113).
- A better understanding is needed of the relationship between the two essential components of reading which the Rose report calls ‘word recognition’ (i.e. phonic decoding – see para. 122 and Appendix 1 paras. 12-16) and ‘language comprehension’ – their relationship is shown in diagrams in Appendix 1.
- ‘Phonic work should be time limited, whereas work on comprehension continues throughout life’ (para. 129).
- The reversibility of reading and spelling needs to be emphasised (paras. 44, 217, 221).
- ‘Synthetic phonics’ is the best kind of ‘quality-first’ teaching for beginners (paras. 47, 51-53) because it recognises all the above.

In these areas, the way forward recommended by Rose differs from the approach hitherto embodied in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). The draft framework does not make this clear, however, and even appears to recycle some flawed NLS thinking: for example, its recommendation that children should ‘use knowledge of syntax, context, word origin and structure to establish meaning’ would be acceptable under the heading ‘Understanding and interpreting texts’, but it actually appears under ‘Word reading skills and strategies’, where it is unacceptable because it implies the continuing use of two of the four original searchlights for word *identification*² and thus conflicts with what is arguably the crux of the Rose report: that ‘word reading’ and ‘language comprehension’ must not continue to be ‘confounded’ as they were in the ‘searchlights’ model – they need to be separated.

If this framework is implemented in September 2006 as it stands, then what the DfES is implementing, particularly for beginners, will not be the Rose recommendations, despite the acceptance of these recommendations by Ruth Kelly, then Secretary of State for Education. The RRF proposes that a new framework for the first stage of literacy teaching should be drafted before September 2006 by people who have a good track record in teaching beginners and/or in research on beginning reading and who are genuinely committed to implementing the findings of the Rose report.³ An outline framework for the teaching of early reading and spelling is suggested overleaf. Broadly speaking, the first year of school is long enough to enable all or virtually all children to learn a significant number of grapheme-phoneme correspondences⁴ and the skills of blending and segmenting (para. 51). If a few lag behind, they need further help in mastering these essentials before proceeding to higher-level work.

² In addition, the only other recommendation under ‘Word reading skills and strategies’ (‘Use phonics to read unknown words’) may imply the retention of the third non-phonetic searchlight (‘Word recognition and graphic knowledge’) if it means that beginners already ‘know’, or need to learn, some words as wholes. This would be at odds with Appendix 1 para. 56 – see footnote 5 on next page.

³ A second group, of comprehension specialists, may need (though less urgently) to draft more detailed guidance on the comprehension skills needed when decoding does not yield instant comprehension. More detailed guidance may also be needed on the teaching of spelling beyond the beginner stage.

⁴ The RRF finds that most children can, within the first year, learn sounds for all alphabet letters and 20 or more digraphs/trigraphs and can be blending and segmenting successfully using these correspondences.

Suggested framework for the first stage of literacy teaching (notionally the first year) based on the final Rose Report (March 2006) (submitted with the response on page 9)

Word recognition/decoding⁵

- Beginners should be taught grapheme-phoneme correspondences from simple to complex (para. 36), and ‘in a clearly defined, incremental sequence’ (para. 51).⁶
- The reversibility of reading (decoding) and spelling (encoding) should be emphasised (paras. 44, 217, 221).
- This teaching should be ‘time-limited’ (paras. 52 and 129), taking months not years (para. 86).
- In the early stages, teachers should put more emphasis than many currently do on all-through-the-word blending (paras. 51, 232, 237).
- Children should be taught to check that they have understood what they have decoded.
- Children’s mastery of the decoding and encoding skills taught up to any given point (grapheme-phoneme correspondences, blending and segmenting) should be frequently assessed and appropriate teaching should be provided for those who need it (para. 59).⁷
- The use of decodable texts should be considered (paras. 82 and 83).⁸
- There should be no guessing at words from pictures or initial letters (paras. 117 and 237).

The above points are mainly to do with content (the ‘body of knowledge, skills and understanding’ which must be taught and learnt). Delivery should be lively and interactive, making use of mnemonics, plastic letters, music, individual white-boards etc. as appropriate.

Language Comprehension

- Early texts for children themselves to read should as far as possible use language already within their speech vocabulary so that additional comprehension demands are not made (Appendix 1, para. 65). If unfamiliar words occur, their meanings should be explained by the teacher – *beginning* readers should not be expected to work out word-meanings by using knowledge of ‘syntax, context, word origin and structure’ as suggested in the draft framework (though this can reasonably be expected of more advanced readers).
- While children are learning to decode competently, teachers should read stimulating stories aloud to them and use discussion of these stories to increase vocabulary and encourage an interest in reading (see, for example, para. 104).
- In the context of a *literacy* curriculum, all speaking and listening activities should be designed to support *literacy* learning rather than as ends in themselves (though group discussion, drama etc. may be ends in themselves elsewhere in the curriculum).
- It should be recognised that comprehension skills continue to develop throughout life (para. 129). They should not be divided into year-by-year objectives.

⁵Para. 122 in the main body of the Rose report and paras. 12-16 of Appendix 1 make it clear that ‘word recognition’ means phonic decoding rather than the recognition of words as wholes. In fact Appendix 1 para. 56 makes the point that even the recognition of ‘sight vocabulary’ depends on ‘understanding and application of the alphabetic principle’.

⁶Experienced teachers in the RRF find that the weaker children, in particular, tend to confuse letter-names and sounds, and would therefore suggest that it is safer to start by teaching all children to call letter-shapes only by their sounds, introducing letter-names at the point where digraphs are introduced.

⁷At all ages and stages, children may not show equal performance on decoding and language comprehension. The two need to be separately assessed ‘to identify learning needs and guide further teaching’ (Appendix 1 para. 18).

⁸The RRF would prefer that the use of decodable texts should be ‘strongly recommended’, but recognises that the Rose report does not go as far as this.

**REPORT ON THE UNITED KINGDOM LITERACY ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE:
'TEACHING READING AND PHONICS: IMPLICATIONS OF THE ROSE REPORT'
19th MAY 2006**

Maggie Downie

in collaboration with Susan Godsland and Elizabeth Nonweiler

The co-founder of UKLA in 1963 (then The United Kingdom Reading Association) was Dr Joyce Morris. Dr Morris was an active proponent of what she termed linguistics-informed phonics. One wonders what she has made of the direction towards whole language which the organisation she helped to found has taken.

As was to be expected, the keynote of the conference was struck in Jackie Marsh's introductory comments, "Synthetic Phonics is necessary, but not sufficient".

The first session of the conference was delivered by Prof. Kathy Hall, of the Open University. She started by presenting her model of the factors which had a bearing on the reading process, in which the alphabetic principle is a small component of the 'Conventions of Print' element. The implication was that it was a small factor among many. She expressed her disquiet at the emphasis given in the Rose Report to 'fidelity to programme' and her reservations on the separation of decoding from comprehension. She thought that we should guard against the 'simple solution' and take on board children's motivations. She suggested that the debate was now about how to teach phonics and made a comparison of Synthetic and Analytic Phonics.

It was at this stage that we began to feel that she had an imperfect understanding of the synthetic phonics process. On her slide setting out the basic differences between the two methods she characterised SP as:

- Sounding out and blending
- Letter by letter decoding
- Working with small phonological units (the phoneme).

'Letter by letter decoding' is frequently seized on by critics of synthetic phonics as being unworkable and illogical; which, indeed, it is, but we know that synthetic phonics teaches grapheme by grapheme decoding. We feel that the distinction between graphemes and letters has not been understood, and that a statement such as this only serves to perpetuate this misunderstanding.

She defined phonological awareness and phonemic awareness and illustrated the process of breaking a word into its individual parts, using 'predict' as an example. With synthetic phonics it would be broken into /p/ /t/ /e/ /d/ /i/ /c/ /t/, whereas with analytic phonics /pr/ would be the onset and (I think) /ed/ and /ict/ would be the rimes.

The question of the origins of the alignments of synthetic and analytic phonics was asked. Prof. Hall believes that analytic phonics is faithful to the developmental sequence, postulated by Goswami, of children working from early awareness of large units (words, syllables) to later awareness of small units (phonemes) and commends this as a compelling reason to teach analytic phonics rather than synthetic phonics. The origin of the alignment of synthetic phonics was not really touched on. She did throw in a heartening quote from Vygotsky: '... sometimes development follows learning'. I felt that it was difficult to subscribe totally to Goswami's 'developmental' model and to agree, too, with Vygotsky! Following on from this, she mentioned research by Ehri which suggested that exposure to letter strings would help develop a strategy for reading new

words and that because of this there was a place for using synthetic phonics along with analytic phonics. The two, she said, 'are not dichotomous'. But was there really a need to teach all 44 phonemes? Some children can transfer learning, and children can vary so much that one progression is not always necessary or possible. She felt that a child's identity on entering school was important and that synthetic phonics would have an adverse effect on children who entered school believing that they were already 'readers'.

When she moved to the human brain and pattern recognition she appeared to become quite enthused by the fact that knowing 'spelling patterns' (using 'ai' as an example) could help children to decode a word, though this knowledge, it appeared, would be a product of analysing words, rather than direct instruction in synthetic phonics.

She then proposed that 'Phoneme awareness is both a cause and consequence of acquiring letter knowledge' and that it can be developed from 'print experiences'. We agree. She went on to say that children acquire phonemic awareness even pre-school, through exposure in infancy to stories and rhymes, that most arrive at school with phonemic awareness and that 'playing with language develops insight'.

Prof. Hall then examined the 'complex orthography' of English, which, in her view, made it impossible that all words could be decoded. Words such as 'yacht', 'people' and 'choir' must be learned as whole words. She pointed out the 'inconsistency' of the vowel sound in words such as 'call', 'cat' and 'car' and suggested that the vowel is more consistent in onset and rime. Once again, I felt that there was a failure to understand phoneme/grapheme correspondence and no knowledge of the ease with which most children learn the correspondences. When I spoke to Prof. Hall after the conference about children knowing one-to-one correspondences, but not knowing digraphs, I felt that she was not quite following what I was saying.

She then questioned the separation of decoding and comprehension as she believed it to be practised by SP advocates. She believed that at 5 years old a child needs to have 'sounds and comprehension closely linked'. We find this a difficult concept. Of course, *words* and comprehension are linked, but comprehension occurs after the word has been decoded and blended. A child cannot comprehend a word until it knows what the word *is*.

The role of the teacher was then discussed. It was proposed that:

- Teachers make a bigger difference than methods
- Teachers make more of a difference in schools in poor areas than in affluent areas
- Good teaching can even compensate for the limitations and constraints of poor programmes, textbooks, curricula etc.

Accomplished Early Years teachers

- Integrate and apply
- Coach
- Assess formatively
- Provide extensive experience with texts
- Teach in small groups.

Effective teachers 'know about phonology and orthography'.

We didn't think we could argue with much of that, apart from the contention that a teacher makes a bigger difference than methods. We cannot see how a teacher trying to

teach with an ineffective method will ever achieve very much; the failure of the NLS to teach 20% of children to read properly seems to contradict this.

The second presentation of the morning was given by Sue Ellis of Strathclyde University. She gave a very clear and interesting account of the setting up and implementation of the Clackmannanshire Synthetic Phonics research project. It was set up as part of a series of Early Intervention Projects in Scottish schools. The schools which took part were seven of the lowest performing schools in Clackmannanshire. She felt that decisions made at various levels were key to its success, from the LEA's initial decisions to involve a small, manageable number of schools and to provide systematic and coherent continuing professional development, through the commitment and enthusiasm of the schools' senior management teams to the support, in training, resources and responsiveness (some parts of the programme were developed further in response to teacher input) enjoyed by those who were implementing the programme, the teachers. In short, she presented a picture of an effectively led, well resourced and well implemented project which appeared to have been enjoyed by the participants. The results, she said, were 'stunning'.

However, she expressed some scepticism as to whether the results were altogether impressive, showing us a table of the participating schools' results in National tests (not SATs, which are not used in Scotland), which showed a considerable variation between individual schools' achievement (though she did say that the results were difficult to interpret, and at least one seemed to be a transcription error). She emphasised that a great deal of funding had been put into the project and questioned whether there would be enough money forthcoming from the government to roll out synthetic phonics, as recommended by the Rose Report.

She also stated, 'There was no increase in engagement', with no further clarification as to what she meant by this. We can only assume that her implication was that children showed no more enthusiasm for reading than children not associated with the project, though how she arrived at this judgement was not made clear.

With regard to the implementation of synthetic phonics she noted that she had worked on the examination of the success of Reading Recovery in Northern Ireland. Interestingly, she said that it had worked well in schools which followed the programme faithfully, but less well and slowly in schools which were hostile to it. Taking this information together with Kathy Hall's disquiet at 'fidelity to the programme', we felt that mixed messages were being given out about fidelity to programmes one approved of and manipulation of programmes one didn't approve of.

As final thoughts she asked us, in relation to synthetic phonics, to remember first that academics, publishers and politicians all have their own agendas; secondly, that we need a strong, respectful educational discourse, and thirdly, that she thought synthetic phonics is interesting, important and deserving of professional attention.

At lunch we were made welcome by the UKLA ladies at our table and we had some discussion of our approaches to the teaching of reading.

The afternoon session was, we felt, more to the taste of the UKLA delegates, as Dr Maureen Lewis gave us a presentation on the latest research into comprehension, with no mention of synthetic phonics beyond a comment that it was a necessary element in learning to read. It was an interesting presentation and contained nothing that any synthetic phonics advocate would disagree with, dealing, as it did, with what we would consider to be the next stage along the road of learning to read effectively.

She did, however, make the startling assertion that she believed, with regard to multi-cueing, a child could focus on more than one cue at once. Prof. Greg Brooks later disagreed with her!

Before the final question and answer session, Prof. Greg Brooks, who was present throughout the day, was invited to join the panel and contribute some remarks on the Rose report and synthetic phonics. He said that he did not think there was enough research evidence that showed that phonics is good for comprehension, and that there was no clear evidence as to which of synthetic or analytic phonics was the better. He did, however, say that for beginning readers synthetic phonics was a 'clear winner' for teaching word identification. He also stated clearly that synthetic phonics was now part of the Framework and could not be evaded.

Conclusion

It was, perhaps, disappointing that a conference with the title 'Teaching Reading and Phonics: The Implications of the Rose Report' had so little content directly related to Synthetic Phonics. We did not think that anyone attending it with a desire to know more about how the recommendations of the Rose report would affect their teaching would have ended the day with a much clearer idea than at the start. We feel it would have been more helpful if an expert SP practitioner had been invited to explain the principles of SP and to clarify the issues which are clearly of concern to UKLA. This would surely have provided an opportunity to engage in the 'professional discourse' called for by Sue Ellis and may have served to allay some of their fears.

We note that there is very little that divides us. We are all deeply concerned with teaching children to read, both as a necessary life skill, and for the pleasure which reading can give. Dr Lewis's presentation on comprehension contained nothing that we would disagree with; indeed, it was interesting and informative. However, it had very little to do with the theme of the conference.

We felt that Sue Ellis could find very little to criticise in the Clackmannanshire results, apart from the expected comment on comprehension being 'only' 3½ months ahead of chronological age and the comment on the variable results in the National tests (though she emphasised that there was absolutely no way of interpreting the wide variation in the table of results and there could well have been mistakes made in the figures).

When, in her closing remarks, she cautioned us to be aware of the different agendas of those promoting synthetic phonics, we felt that she had missed a very important group, that group being the teachers who use synthetic phonics. We have no agenda, other than a desire to teach the maximum possible number of children to read effectively, in the fastest time possible, using the most efficient method we know.

With regard to comprehension, we feel that there is a point of significant difference. UKLA seem to take the stance that reading itself develops comprehension. While we would agree that Stanovich's 'Matthew Effect' means that reading will aid the extension of vocabulary and understanding of syntax of a child who has been taught to read, we cannot see how this applies to the *initial* teaching of reading. Beginning readers see what they may have been told is a word, but have no knowledge of how to translate the symbols on the page into the spoken word that they represent. Without knowledge of what word the symbols represent, there can be no comprehension. We would contend that until a child is able to decode accurately and fluently, comprehension of the written word correlates directly with the child's comprehension of the spoken word. It seems to us to defy logic to believe that a child who could not understand a word when spoken would

understand it when written. We would also contend that unless children can ‘read’ a word (by decoding), they cannot extract any meaning from it.

The question of phonemic awareness and Goswami’s developmental model is, we think, the issue which divides us most. It is a fundamental issue, for it must be extremely difficult for people who firmly believe that children enter school only being able to discriminate sounds at word level, and can only finally learn to discriminate phonemes by a *developmental* process, to adjust to the principle underlying synthetic phonics (and supported by research) which says that most children can only learn to discriminate phonemes through an *instructional* process.

It could be argued that Goswami formed her model on the basis of work with children who were taught by whole language methods, and so indeed, had no concept of phonemes, as they weren’t taught to discriminate them with whole language. As we know that some children are able to work out the alphabetic principle for themselves, it seems plausible that, with a certain amount of analytic phonics teaching and self teaching, a number of children would arrive at phonemic awareness. As this was not explicitly taught, the conclusion could be that it was arrived at by a developmental process. But Goswami herself now seems to be acknowledging that children may be capable of single phoneme awareness at an earlier age. Discussing the NLS teaching of letter/sound correspondences in 2002 (‘In the Beginning was the Rhyme? A Reflection on Hulme, Hatcher, Nation, Brown, Adams and Stuart’, *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 82, 2002), she writes:

At first sight it may seem peculiar that spelling correspondences for the large units (rimes) that are phonologically easier to process are taught later than spelling correspondences for the small units (phonemes) that are phonologically more difficult to process. However, the small units (phonemes) usually correspond to single letters, which are clearly separable in the orthography, and most words used in the early reading curriculum have a 1:1 correspondence between letters and sounds. Furthermore, many children learn the alphabet before formal teaching in reading commences, and there is good evidence that this letter knowledge helps them once they begin learning to read (e.g. Treiman, Tincoff, Rodriguez, Mouzaki and Francis, 1998). Hence pedagogically it may well be easier teaching children about letters, which many of them will already know about, and then to proceed to instruction about larger units such as rimes.

It is certainly the experience of synthetic phonics practitioners that (their) pupils, who are taught first the individual phonemes (alongside?) and the letters which represent them, then how to blend them into words, develop phonemic awareness as a result of this instruction (with no need for ‘playing with sounds’ as preparation for this learning). We would agree that many children do enter school unable to discriminate sounds at anything other than word level (once they have learned to talk in infancy they have had no need to be aware of phonemes), but we know that, with clear and explicit teaching, nearly all children are able to relearn this skill.

We also noted over the course of the day that there was a certain amount of distrust expressed of ‘scientific’ research and approval of ‘action research’. We cannot see how any valid conclusions can be arrived at without the rigorous testing of hypotheses and scrutiny of results required by scientific research. If scientific research is discounted, all that remains is anecdote and subjectivity. We cannot believe that this is a sound foundation on which to base educational practice.

Overall we thought the day was interesting and enlightening. We certainly left the conference with plenty to discuss and think about.

We were amused at one point when Dr Lewis spoke of attending conferences and being 'stuck next to the phonics lot'. We wondered what distinguished them from the rest: horns, tails, a whiff of sulphur? We felt that our attendance had some value in informing us of the concerns and fears of many practitioners, and we very much hope that some UKLA members will (if you will excuse the mixed metaphor) 'venture into the lions' den' in search of further mutual understanding when we hold our Autumn conference.

THE EARLY READING DEVELOPMENT PILOT (ERDP)

Jennifer Chew

This study was announced in the government's response to the parliamentary Education and Skills Committee's April 2005 report on the teaching of reading and has been carried out, under the auspices of the DfES, during the academic year 2005-2006. The final evaluation is due to take place in July 2006. The Rose review took account of findings up to December 2005 – see paragraphs 95-98 of the Rose report.

The project is based on an 'action research' model and has involved teaching Foundation Stage children in about 180 schools a speeded-up version of *Playing with Sounds*. The teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondences is still not as fast as in the leading synthetic phonics programmes and there is still some emphasis on awareness of sounds other than phonemes, but the increase in pace has been found quite feasible – see paragraphs 96 and 97 of the Rose report. A welcome feature of the ERDP 'Materials for Practitioners' is the emphasis on letter-*sounds* rather than letter-*names*. Much less welcome, however, are suggestions such as the following, which come from the 'Sample direct teaching sessions from a practitioner':

'Explain that when you get stuck reading a word you can use the first sound to help you work it out.... Can the children work out [from the first sound] what word would make sense? This is another reading strategy which is useful to combine with phonics cues' (p. 41);

'Ask them if they can remember what they should use if they get stuck reading the word (the first sound). Get the children to identify the first sound of the word. What else could they use to help them work out what the word says (the objects or pictures – this is another reading strategy)' (p. 43);

'During guided reading sessions, remind children to use the strategies you have been teaching them, such as using the initial sound of a word and checking that it makes sense' (p. 58);

'Regularly start shared reading sessions by asking the children what we do if we can't read a word (strategies covered so far should include using the first sound of a word, looking at the pictures, predicting what would make sense, going back and reading the sentence again' (p. 59).

This kind of advice conflicts with the Rose recommendations. If the effectiveness of the ERDP is evaluated in July 2006 by means of standardised reading and spelling tests, it will be possible to compare the results with (for example) the results in Clackmannanshire, as presumably intended by the Education and Skills Committee. Objective testing may show us whether it is better to teach beginners to read unfamiliar words solely by all-through-the-word sounding and blending or to teach them to rely on

initial letters, pictures and context. If no standardised testing is done, no comparisons will be possible and the ERDP will not have proved its worth in a way which would justify incorporating its approach in the framework for September 2006. This has been pointed out by RRF members to people in senior positions at the DfES. It will be interesting to see what happens next. Will standardised testing be carried out? If so, how will the results compare with those from Clackmannanshire and elsewhere? If not, will the DfES have any justification for allowing the ERDP to influence the new framework?

**RRF CONFERENCE
3 NOVEMBER 2006
CLORE MANAGEMENT CENTRE (BIRKBECK COLLEGE),
25-27 TORRINGTON SQUARE, LONDON WC1 7HX**

Main speaker: Jim Rose, CBE

Other speakers to be announced.

For further information, please visit www.rrf.org.uk or complete this form and send it **with a stamped self-addressed envelope**, to Mrs Lesley Charlton, 37 Braemar Road, Leamington Spa, CV32 7EZ.

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