

Reading Reform Foundation Conference

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The recent history of government initiatives in the early teaching of reading, leading up to the introduction of *Letters and Sounds*

A talk by Jennifer Chew

I'm going to take 'recent history' as starting about 21 years ago, as that was when we first had government guidance on the curriculum generally and the teaching of reading in particular – the National Curriculum, with the English Order representing the wisdom of the time on the teaching of reading. As everyone knows, history is all about documents and dates, so I'll be referring to quite a lot of those.

My focus will be on Wave 1 teaching, past and present – the way that children are started off on reading and spelling. Before 1989, primary schools had been free to do very much their own thing – secondary schools were rather more constrained by exam. requirements. During the few years leading up to the first National Curriculum English Order, the 'whole language' influence had mushroomed in primary schools in England in the form of the 'real books' movement. Many people in education had come under the spell of Frank Smith, Ken Goodman and others, and had come to believe that children learn to read naturally – they start school already knowing a number of 'sight' words as wholes and when they encounter words that they don't already know, the more they rely on 'wholes' for clues the better – whole sentences around the unfamiliar words, and whole pages, including pictures. The view was that only in this way could children go beyond merely decoding the black marks on the page and really read for meaning:

Reading is much more than the decoding of black marks upon a page: it is a quest for meaning, and one which requires the reader to be an active participant....In their quest for meaning, children need to be helped to become confident and resourceful in the use of a variety of reading cues. They need to be able to recognise on sight a large proportion of the words they encounter and to be able to predict meaning on the basis of phonic, idiomatic and grammatical regularities and of what makes sense in context; children should be encouraged to make informed guesses. (1988: *English for ages 5 to 11: Proposals of the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the Secretary of State for Wales*. This was the first part of the 'Cox Report', which formed the basis for the National Curriculum English Order)

Phonics was downplayed because it involved breaking whole words into parts and according to the gurus, that made learning very hard for children.

The whole-language influence is clear in the 1990 National Curriculum English Order: picture and context cues first and foremost, then 'sight' words, then phonic cues, with the suggestion that this means just initial letters.

[at Level 2 – the expected level for 7-year-olds] Pupils should be able to ... use picture and context cues, words recognised on sight and phonic cues in reading...Use a picture to help make sense of a text; ...use initial letters to help with recognising words. (1990: *English in the National Curriculum*)

One document from which I'm not quoting directly was called *Language in the National Curriculum*, which arose from a project which ran from 1989 to 1992. The early reading section was dominated by the theories of Ken and Yetta Goodman, Frank Smith, Margaret Meek and Don Holdaway, and there was a section on how to do a miscue analysis. The reason why I haven't quoted from it is that it was never published – the government (Conservative at the time) had funded the project but blocked publication, though this seemed to be more because of the line it took on grammar than because of the line it took on early reading. Unofficial copies of the document were nevertheless widely circulated.

During the early 1990s there were some attempts at revising the English Order, probably because of pressure from phonics advocates, but the whole-language influence continued:

[under the heading 'Initial reading skills'] **Level 2** pupils should be able to: ... use more than one strategy (phonic, graphic, syntactic, contextual) when reading unfamiliar words. (September 1993: *National Curriculum Council Consultation Report*)

By 1994, there was increased emphasis on the 'relationships between print symbols and sound patterns', but more at the level of onset and rime and syllables than of phonemic units. In the extract below the first four bullet-points stress phonological awareness, alliteration, rhyme and syllables, though phonics gets a look-in after that:

Phonic knowledge focuses on the relationships between print symbols and sound patterns. [Children] should be made aware of the sounds of spoken language, and taught how symbols correspond to those sounds. Opportunities should be given for:

- listening to sounds in oral language to develop phonological awareness;
- recognising alliteration, sound patterns and rhyme and relating these to patterns in letters;
- considering syllables in longer words;
- identifying initial and final sounds in words, including sounds which rhyme;
- identifying and using a comprehensive range of letters and sounds (including combinations of letters, blends and digraphs), and paying specific attention to their use in the formation of words;
- recognising inconsistencies in phonic patterns.
- recognising that some letters do not always produce a sound themselves but influence the sound of others, *e.g. final 'e', soft 'c'*. (May 1994: *English in the National Curriculum: Draft proposals*)

Labour came to power in 1997 and introduced the National Literacy Strategy in 1998. David Blunkett was Secretary of State for Education at the time and set a target of 80% of children reaching Level 4 in the Key Stage 2 tests by 2002. He was confident that this target would be met and said he would resign if it wasn't. It wasn't, but he was saved from the fate of resignation as he was no longer Education Secretary in 2002 – he was Home Secretary.

Whatever its faults, the NLS *did* allow a much greater role for phonics than there had previously been. The following makes it clear that that reliance on context and grammar is not such a good thing after all – children need phonics:

When pupils read familiar and predictable texts, they can easily become over-reliant on their knowledge of context and grammar. They may pay too little attention to how words sound and how they are spelt. But if pupils cannot decode individual words through their knowledge of sounds and spellings, they find it difficult to get at the meaning of more complex, less familiar texts....At Key Stage 1, there should be a strong and systematic emphasis on phonics and other word level skills. (1998: *National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching*)

So far so good, but unfortunately the NLS still included an emphasis on 'sight' words – it gave lists which were headed 'High frequency words to be taught as "sight recognition" words', and there was nothing to suggest that they should be taught otherwise than as wholes, with no attention to any decodable parts, despite the fact that 18 of the 45 Reception words could be decoded by children who had gone no further than learning 26 letters and a sound to say for each. Several years later claims were made that a whole-word approach to the list of 'sight recognition' words had not been intended:

...I make the following recommendations...Make it clear that, within the 100 most frequent words, only those that are irregular should be taught as sight words. (August 2003: *Sound Sense: The phonics element of the National Literacy Strategy* – report by Greg Brooks on the DfES Phonics Seminar of March 2003)

...Ofsted report that some teachers ... teach the 100 most frequent words in English as though they were all irregular. Clearly there is further clarification needed here. (?Autumn 2003: DfES response to Brooks paper)

The high-frequency words listed in the back of the NLS *Framework for Teaching* are not intended to be taught by rote.... Many of these words are phonically regular and thus perfectly decodable. A proportion are irregular and practitioners teach these as "words with a tricky bit in" (2004: *Playing with Sounds: A Supplement to Progression in Phonics*).

It was inevitable that 'sight'-word teaching would be done as it was, however: Frith had said back in 1985 that the first stage in reading was logographic – that theory had a huge following and had appeared to be supported by the National Curriculum documents. Another problem with the NLS was that there was still quite a lot of emphasis on onset and rime, which also assumes a sight-word start. A third problem was the 'searchlights' model. There is

some evidence that the original intention was that only two of the four searchlights should be used for word-identification: these two were phonics and what is called ‘word recognition and graphic knowledge’, where ‘word recognition’ meant the ability to read familiar words ‘at sight’ and ‘graphic knowledge’ evidently meant ‘shape, length and common spelling patterns’. The other two ‘searchlights’ (grammatical knowledge and knowledge of context) were apparently supposed to be used for comprehension. The extract below implies that children should first apply ‘word-level’ skills to read the text, and should only then use ‘other reading cues’ to check for meaning and self-correct:

Shared reading provides a context for applying and teaching word level skills and for teaching how to use other reading cues to check for meaning, and identify and self-correct errors. (1998: *National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching*)

Unfortunately, however, teachers were not used to making this distinction – they were used to teaching children to use context and grammar (and, indeed, pictures) for word-identification, and many assumed that the searchlights model was just more of the same.

Within a year of the rollout of the NLS, it was realised that phonics was still not being taught as intended, and a supplement was produced – this was *Progression in Phonics*, published in 1999. The authors of this tried to incorporate the thinking of Diane McGuinness, in the sense that they included many activities designed to teach children about the phonemes in spoken words and how they are represented by letters:

The most effective phonics instruction teaches children to identify phonemes in spoken language first, then to understand how these are represented by letters and letter combinations (graphemes). (1999: *Progression in Phonics*)

There were too few activities on blending-for-reading, however. Of the 28 activities suggested in *Progression in Phonics*, seven activities involved just identifying phonemes in spoken words with no reference to letters, an eighth had two versions, one of which involved letters, and a further ten involved identifying phonemes in spoken words and representing them by letters. A total of eighteen activities therefore stressed the identification of phonemes in spoken words; against this, only six activities involved any blending, and the blending aspect was not stressed in all of these. That accounts for 24 out of 28 activities – the other four involved practice just on grapheme-phoneme correspondences without blending or segmenting, or else practice on rhyming. Moreover, the searchlights remained at the heart of the approach, which was surely not in line with McGuinness thinking.

By 2004, it was clear that the NLS had still not raised standards as expected among children who had had it from the start of their schooling. The parliamentary Education and Skills Committee then heard evidence on the teaching of reading from November 2004 until February 2005, including evidence from several synthetic phonics advocates. The Committee recommended that a proper study be carried out in England, comparing synthetic phonics with other methods:

We therefore strongly urge the DfES to commission a large-scale comparative study, comparing the National Literacy Strategy with “phonics fast and first” approaches.

(April 2005: *Teaching Children to Read* - the report of the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee on its inquiry conducted between November 2004 and February 2005)

A study of exactly this type was not done. The nearest we got, which was not very near, was the Early Reading Development Pilot, which had plenty wrong with it but did at least show that phonics teaching could be speeded up.

The most important outcome of the Select Committee's report was that Jim Rose was appointed to carry out a review. He and his team considered existing research and visited many schools teaching by different methods, including schools using synthetic phonics. The Rose review, published in March 2006, concluded that synthetic phonics was the most effective approach:

Despite uncertainties in research findings, the practice seen by the review shows that the systematic approach, which is generally understood as "synthetic" phonics, offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers. (March 2006: *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* – Jim Rose's final report)

The government undertook to provide a new programme to replace previous NLS guidance. Before I go on to that programme, which of course was *Letters and Sounds*, I need to mention a publication known as the 'core position papers' which I first saw in the summer of 2006 but which I think had been around for several months before that. I didn't know who had written it and still don't know, but I thought it was very much on the right lines, though not perfect. It was addressed to head-teachers, literacy leaders, teachers and others, and among its plus-points, it made clear to such people that the simple view of reading was to replace the searchlights model. Another plus-point was that it advised firmly against teaching children to use cues from context and pictures in order to identify words – it said they should tackle unfamiliar words by decoding them phonically. There were also some minus-points – I'll give examples as I go along.

A team was assembled in the autumn of 2006 to write the new programme, and I was very surprised to be asked to be part of it. I hesitated at first because I would have preferred schools just to be left free to use good commercial programmes and said so, but I was told that a government programme would be produced whether or not I helped with it, so I thought it better to be involved than not. It was made clear that we had to follow the core position papers. In spite of feeling that these were not perfect, I felt we could still produce a good synthetic phonics programme which would provide far better Wave 1 teaching than there had been until then.

So what *is* synthetic phonics? 'Phonics' is from the Greek word for 'sound' but 'phonics' is not just about sounds: it's about the relationship between sounds and written symbols, mainly at the level of the smallest units – that is, the individual phonemes of spoken words and the letters and letter-groups that represent them. The 'synthetic' part of 'synthetic phonics' comes from the Greek meaning 'put together' and refers to the fact that a key characteristic of this

approach is its emphasis on putting sounds together in reading. In reading, we say sounds in response to the letters on the page and then put those sounds together or blend or synthesise them into a seamless whole word. So the term ‘synthetic’ comes firmly from the *reading* side of things, though in the UK, all or most synthetic phonics programmes also teach children to spell by the reverse process of splitting the spoken form of the word into its component sounds and choosing letters and letter-groups to represent the sounds. It’s interesting, though, that this way of teaching spelling is *not* part of synthetic phonics in German-speaking countries – that’s according to an article by Wimmer and Mayringer published in 2002 in *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Volume 94 No. 2.

Phase One in *Letters and Sounds* is letter-free, so involves no phonics. I would have preferred this letter-free phase to be omitted, but this was not allowed – and in fact I’ve heard of one school where teachers are saying that letter-free blending and segmenting in the nursery is paying off when children go into Reception. Phase Two starts by introducing a few letter-sound correspondences which lend themselves to the formation of a reasonable number of simple 2- and 3-letter words, so that blending-for-reading and segmenting-for-spelling can be introduced very early. Starting blending after just a few letter-sound correspondences have been taught is in line with synthetic phonics practice in Austria, where, additionally, the first consonants which are introduced are continuants such as /m/, on the grounds that these make blending easier – so they take blending very seriously. Starting blending early is also in line with the Clackmannanshire approach and with what happens in tried and tested programmes such as *Jolly Phonics* and *Read Write Inc.* *Letters and Sounds* then covers the remaining letters of the alphabet and one sound for each at the rate of four correspondences per week, with some longer words being introduced quite early. There are banks of suitable words as each new correspondence is added, and, in due course, phrases and sentences are suggested for decoding.

The core position papers had laid down that we should start with one spelling of each of 44 phonemes, but *Letters and Sounds* takes some slight liberties with this, both on the ‘one spelling’ front and on the ‘44 phonemes’ front – for example, the need to teach all letters of the alphabet makes it sensible to teach both ‘c’ and ‘k’ for the /k/ sound, and teaching ‘ck’ is a logical extension of this, so that children can start reading and spelling words such as ‘duck’ and ‘ticket’ as well as words *beginning* with /k/. So three spellings of the /k/ sound are taught very early, as are also double consonants as in ‘fill’, ‘puff’ and ‘mess’. The need to cover all letters of the alphabet also makes it sensible to teach the sounds that ‘x’ and ‘qu’ represent in ‘fox’ and ‘quick’, despite the fact that each of these sounds is technically two phonemes rather than one and that they duplicate sounds represented by other letters. The teaching of digraphs then starts in Phase 3. The core position papers had laid down that enough digraphs should be taught to take the number of sounds to 44 before words with adjacent consonants were introduced (as in ‘stop’ and ‘hand’) – we didn’t like this and tried to get the order of Phases 3 and 4 changed but were unsuccessful. We advised flexibility in the *Notes of Guidance*, however, and apparently some teachers have taken this on board.

We *did* manage to get the number of phonemes covered in Reception reduced from 44 (as laid down in the core position papers) to 42. We pointed out that teaching 44 would entail

teaching the /zh/ and /oor/ sounds, for which there is no beginner-type spelling – there is an additional problem with the /oor/ sound, which is that it does not feature in everyone’s speech. *Letters and Sounds* includes assessments for Phases 2, 3 and 4 which should enable teachers to see if any children are falling behind – this should mean that Wave 2-type help can start as early as the first term of Reception. In Phase 5, which should start in Year 1, alternatives are taught – alternative pronunciations for graphemes and alternative graphemes for sounds. If *Letters and Sounds* is properly taught, most of what children need to know for reading should have been covered by the end of Year 1 and children should have a good grounding in spelling. With Phase 6, in Year 2, the emphasis moves more to spelling, though anything that children learn about spelling should also continue to help their reading development.

I’m going to say a bit now about how *Letters and Sounds* seems to be working out in practice, though here I am not claiming to have an extensive overview. The nearest I can get to an overview of the take-up by schools is a recent survey conducted by Schoolzone for Oxford University Press. 81% of the schools which responded said that they used *Letters and Sounds*, but of these only 60% said that they set aside time for it every day and followed the guidelines closely; 29% said that they had adapted and modified it and 11% said that they were still getting to grips with it. If the sample is representative, this would mean that just under half of all schools are using *Letters and Sounds* systematically, roughly a third are using it not very systematically, and about a fifth are not using it at all.

I myself have managed to visit only two schools using *Letters and Sounds*. This is in spite of having ‘phoned 7 schools within half an hour’s drive of my home – only one of these was using *Letters and Sounds*, though two said that they referred to it a bit and one of these said that although it had continued to use *Jolly Phonics* as it had done for many years, it had changed the order in which it introduced grapheme-phoneme correspondences to fit in with *Letters and Sounds*. These schools may be typical of the ones which say they are not using *Letters and Sounds* systematically. I then visited the school which had said it *was* using *Letters and Sounds* and found some use of *Jolly Phonics* there too. I also visited another school much further afield – that visit was arranged for me by a Primary National Strategy Regional Adviser. Again I found evidence of continuing use of *Jolly Phonics* alongside *Letters and Sounds* – for example I saw the children doing *Jolly Phonics* actions and noticed that the first spelling for the /i/ sound was ‘ie’ as in *Jolly Phonics* rather than ‘igh’ as in *Letters and Sounds*. In both schools, the discrete phonics teaching was good, as far as I could see. In one school, however, the reading books were from Book Bands and gave the children very little scope for applying phonic knowledge – I was told in so many words that the children were expected to rely quite heavily on picture cues, though when I pointed out that *Letters and Sounds* advised explicitly against this, the school seemed willing to reconsider. The other school provided books from two reading-schemes, one being *Rigby Star*, where the books are a good match for *Letters and Sounds*, but the other was *Oxford Reading Tree*, which is not a good match. The Reception teacher said that the children seemed to take both kinds of books in their stride – I’d have liked to check that by hearing children read, but that wasn’t possible. It was clear that the *Rigby Star* readers were also used in at least some other

schools in this local authority. The Schoolzone survey also suggested that schools were moving more towards decodable books.

As far as test results are concerned, information is thin on the ground, but I know of one school using *Letters and Sounds* where the children had an average word-reading age about 9 months above chronological age by half-way through Reception in spite of some elements in the teaching not being ideal.

I have also been able to get feedback from a Primary National Strategy Regional Adviser and a local authority Communication, Language and Literacy consultant on the way *Letters and Sounds* is working:

- Some schools started Reception children on *Letters and Sounds* from 2007 onwards but didn't start Y1 and Y2 children on it at the same time. In these schools, September 2010 may be the first time that any impact from *Letters and Sounds* will be able to be seen at Key Stage 2.
- In schools using *Letters and Sounds*, about 60% of children are thought to be secure at Phase 2 by December of Reception – that means that they know about 19 letter-sound correspondences and can blend and segment with them.
- There seems to be no firm information on whether there has been any reduction in the need for Reading Recovery in schools using *Letters and Sounds*. The consultant said that in her local authority, 18 schools were involved in the Communication, Language and Literacy project but only 3 had Reading Recovery. 3 out of 18 is about 17%, which is about the same as the percentage in two other local authorities that I've heard about. This suggests that if schools need Wave 3 intervention, most may be using something other than Reading Recovery.

At least on paper, I think that *Letters and Sounds* represents a big step forward in government initiatives. Quite a lot of schools are probably using it alongside commercial programmes or at least resources from these – this may at first sight seem to go against advice given about 'Fidelity to the programme' in *Letters and Sounds*, but in fact the advice there is about following just one *sequence* in introducing phonic content, and it's stated that 'Adhering to the sequence of the phonic content of the programme does not...prevent settings and schools from supplementing their chosen programme by using additional resources...which they make themselves or purchase from commercial sources'.

One final point: it seems that many more teachers are realising the need for decodable books – this was indicated by the Schoolzone survey done for Oxford University Press, where 42% of respondents said that it was 'very important' to have phonics reading books and 47% said that it was 'quite important' – a total of 89%. It may be that the existence of *Letters and Sounds* has helped to prompt this realisation. In any event, publishers of reading schemes *do* seem to be responding, and the availability of more decodable books may turn out to be a big factor in raising standards.