

House of Commons Select Committee for Science and Technology Evidence Check 1: Early Literacy Interventions (December 2009)

Reading Reform Foundation Response

The Reading Reform Foundation (RRF) welcomes the report of the Science and Technology Committee and applauds the committee's conclusions in regard to both Every Child a Reader (ECAR) and Dyslexia.

Every Child a Reader – Research and Alternatives to Reading Recovery

The RRF has always been deeply concerned that the DCSF made Reading Recovery its intervention of choice without strong evidence or fair comparisons between Reading Recovery and other interventions. In 2006, the RRF published Diane McGuinness's critique of the Burroughs-Lange Evaluation which was used by the government as evidence of Reading Recovery's success. McGuinness highlighted concerns about the lack of a proper control group:

There is no doubt that the children receiving Reading Recovery did significantly better in the final tests at the end of the year than they did at the beginning, and significantly better than the "control group". But then, there are control groups and control groups. The Reading Recovery children received extensive one-to-one tuition during their second year of school, and the so-called control group -- children without Reading Recovery, got no consistent treatment. In fact, the description of what they received is so vague as to be non-existent.

Similarly, the Committee comments:

it is so clear that one-to-one interventions are better than doing nothing it is not worth conducting trials that compare one-to-one interventions against no intervention. (par 51)

When the Committee asked Diana Johnson (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools) what alternatives to Reading Recovery were considered, she admitted that she did not know the answer. Carol Willis, the DCSF's Chief Scientific Adviser, referred the Committee to Greg Brooks' publication, 'What Works for Children with Literacy Difficulties' (2002). Brooks does not place Reading Recovery high in the rankings of interventions: out of 77 studies, the two that used Reading Recovery appear in 30th and 45th position when comparing Ratio Gains (p. 137-141) - hardly an outstanding intervention. The government's response to the question about alternatives to Reading Recovery is equally unsatisfactory:

The choice of Reading Recovery as the core intervention of the ECAR programme was made during the pilot phase led by the Every Child a Chance Trust. The Department saw no reason to change this when taking on the programme for national roll out. (par 35)

According to its website the Every Child a Chance Trust was set up in 2007, but 'Every Child a Reader' was set up by Reading Recovery in 2005. Reading Recovery was the intervention

because Reading Recovery was the organisation which set up the pilot. This begs the question of just who is in the driving seat here. Is it Reading Recovery or the DCSF?

The RRF supports the Committee's conclusion that the quality of evidence Reading Recovery is based on is unsatisfactory and that "the Government did not formally consider any other kind of intervention" (par 36).

Reading Recovery and Synthetic Phonics

Since the Rose Report publication (2006), the RRF has consistently pointed out that Reading Recovery methodology contradicts government guidance on the teaching of reading.

The Committee has this to say:

Phonics is "embedded" in the modern Reading Recovery, but systematic, synthetic phonics ... is not. Teaching children to read is one of the most important things the State does. The Government has accepted Sir Jim Rose's recommendation that systematic phonics should be at the heart of the Government's strategy for teaching children to read. This is in conflict with the continuing practice of word memorisation and other teaching practices from the 'whole language theory of reading' used particularly in Wave 3 Reading Recovery. The Government should vigorously review these practices with the objective of ensuring that Reading Recovery complies with its policy. (par 59)

Here the RRF conclusion is different. We believe that changing Reading Recovery as proposed is neither feasible nor compatible with the philosophy of its founder, Marie Clay. Surely it would be more effective to bring in high quality training using existing synthetic phonics programmes that conform to 'criteria for assuring high quality phonic work' (DCSF Standards Site), for struggling readers in all Key Stages.

Dyslexia

The second part of the Science and Technology Committee report deals with dyslexia. We find this a more difficult area to discuss than Reading Recovery, because a diagnosis of dyslexia often goes a long way to relieving the emotional pressures which arise from reading failure. However, without wishing in any way to belittle the emotional support that the label gives, the RRF strongly supports the Committee's conclusion, that:

there is no convincing evidence that if a child with dyslexia is not labelled as dyslexic, but receives full support for his or her reading difficulty, that the child will do any worse than a child who is labelled as dyslexic and then receives specialist help (p. 28, par 77)

We know that even with high quality synthetic phonics instruction some children have difficulties which make reading acquisition harder for them. Yet in schools where all teachers and teaching assistants are rigorously trained in the teaching of reading, it is possible for every child to learn to read successfully (see Ev 100-101).

We acknowledge that during a period when reading was taught mainly through memorising whole words and guessing from context cues, the emphasis of specialist teaching on

systematic phonics instruction was both innovative and relatively successful. This is no longer the case. As a result, we believe children who take longer to learn to read need more intensive support according to synthetic phonics principles (Rose, 2006, par 51), rather than ‘specialist teaching’ as described in ‘No to Failure’ (Dyslexia-SpLD Trust 2009, par 4.3).

We agree with Phil Willis (MP), who said:

The government should stop talking about specialist dyslexia teaching. Children diagnosed with dyslexia and children who struggle with reading for other reasons, are taught how to read in exactly the same way. (Select Committee Announcement 18th December 2010)

We share the committee’s concern that there is “a further danger that an overemphasis on dyslexia may disadvantage other children with profound reading difficulties”. (p. 28, par 77)

The Committee calls for “properly constructed trials, in which children who have been identified as dyslexic are matched against proper controls and subjected to a range of different interventions” (par 82). We suggest that schools such as Elmhurst Primary (Ev 100-101), which have no children who can be identified as dyslexic, yet which have excellent results in teaching children to read, should be identified and included in such trials.

The Committee reports that

the Government decided to spend time and money looking specifically at dyslexia because of the strength of the dyslexia lobby, rather than because of any pre-existing, well researched, well defined problem’ (p. 30 par 84)

Quality First Teaching and Teacher Training

Quality First Teaching is a prerequisite for children allocated to both Reading Recovery and specialist dyslexia teaching. It provides “systematic phonic work ... much strengthened by a synthetic approach” (Rose 2006, par 51). We would like to point out the danger that those making decisions about children with reading difficulties may think the children have had quality first teaching, when in fact they have not. Too few teachers have had good enough training to carry out quality first teaching or to judge if children have received it. The RRF has long been concerned about the quality of training in the teaching of reading. We believe that teacher training institutions should be required to give high quality instruction in the principles and practice of synthetic phonics teaching. As long as teachers are poorly trained, quality first teaching cannot be guaranteed.