

Why the Reading Reform Foundation is Needed

The initial teaching of reading English has been an extraordinarily contentious topic for many decades. Millions of words and huge amounts of cash have been poured into the promotion of theories, the development of reading programmes and research into all aspects of the reading process. Yet in many English speaking countries we still have unacceptably large numbers of children who leave school barely able to read and spell. In societies where literacy is key to just about all aspects of life the barely literate are, at best, condemned to a life of subterfuge to disguise their poor literacy skills, while feeling inadequate about their failure to learn to read, and, at worst, to live on the margins of society; unable to progress far in employment and vulnerable to exploitation. Statistics suggest that they are likely to turn to petty crime and to be imprisoned at some period of their lives.

In a recent UK TV documentary a middle-aged lady who had never learned to read spoke of her inability to enjoy the simple pleasure of sharing a book with her grandchildren. What a wealth of sadness there was in that admission. And how she glowed with happiness when, after instruction, she proudly read through a simple child's book which she could now read to her grandchild.

We who are able to read take these things for granted; sadly, many who are able to read seem unable to understand the terrible void which poor literacy opens up in people's lives.

The void opens very early, often by the end of a child's first year in school. With every year that passes the void grows larger and the effects of poor literacy skills intensify. Leaving aside the profound emotional and behavioural effects that 'reading failure' has on a child, it is an inescapable truth that reading, as one child put it to me, "...makes you cleverer". Research has clearly shown that written material has the richest vocabulary. Without an extensive vocabulary a child has no words with which to express any idea beyond the mundane. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but only if you have those words in your vocabulary to start with. It is reading which exposes children to vocabulary which they would never encounter in daily spoken exchanges or on TV or radio. It is written language which models the use of those words; their place in the grammatical and syntactical structure of the language, their meaning (and shades of meaning) and their ability to inform, entertain and educate.

We believe that the opportunity to access the benefits of reading should be available to the greatest possible number of people. The onus is on all educators to find the most effective and efficient way to teach reading to the greatest possible number of children. This aim should be the first consideration of anyone involved with the teaching of reading. There is no place for blind adherence to theories and ideologies, or for politicisation of debate, while lives are being blighted by poor literacy skills.

The UK RRF has campaigned consistently for the introduction of evidence-based teaching of reading in the UK. This is needed not only for the initial teaching of reading but also for intensified support in the early years for the children who are slower to learn and for children, young people and adults who have failed to learn to read competently over the past few decades. Evidence from high quality research,

both psychological and educational, has consistently shown that systematic, structured, explicit instruction in letter-sound correspondences (the ‘Alphabetic Code’), blending sounds for reading and segmenting the spoken word for spelling, gives the greatest number of beginning readers the surest, most secure foundation of word identification skills on which to build understanding and appreciation of written language. This method is popularly known as Synthetic Phonics. There is nothing ‘artificial about it; ‘synthetic’, in this context, merely means ‘combining separate elements to form a coherent whole’. Synthetic Phonics was endorsed in the recent Rose Review (2006), adopted by the UK Government and forms the basis of DCFS guidance on the initial teaching of reading.

Synthetic phonics is a method for teaching reading based on the alphabetic code or how sounds are represented by letters. English has about 44 sounds. Pupils are taught:

- letter-sound correspondences
- to blend all-through-the-word for reading
- to segment all-through-the-spoken-word for spelling
- that spelling is the reverse of reading
- to read words with unusual letter-sound correspondences by identifying the unusual part before blending

They are not taught:

- letter names for reading
- to memorise words before they can read them by blending the sounds
- to guess words from context or initial letters

Teaching is systematic, fast-paced and comprehensive. Knowledge of letter-sound correspondences is put to immediate use through reading and spelling.

This teaching approach is set within a literacy-rich environment and includes a full range of age-appropriate activities to develop children’s language. For example, adults read aloud to children from books that are more advanced than most of the children can manage on their own and children are encouraged to express themselves through talk and to listen carefully to others.

In 2009 the UK Reading Reform Foundation achieved 20 years of campaigning for evidence based teaching of reading in Britain. That this has passed unremarked and uncelebrated is hardly surprising as the goal of **all** our children being taught to read by the simple logic and power of Synthetic Phonics is far from being achieved.

Unfortunately, there has been a perception that this approach to the teaching of reading is only for beginning readers. Practitioners rapidly discover that teaching based on Synthetic Phonics principles is also a simple, yet powerful, method for helping struggling readers of all ages, from 6 to 60 (and beyond!). Yet the UK government, having officially endorsed the method in its Letters and Sounds guidance, has failed to trust the evidence-based judgements of the Rose Report and has been induced to endorse and generously fund an intervention, Reading Recovery (under the auspices of the Every Child a Reader programme), which uses methods wholly inconsistent with those recommended by Rose - methods which are practically identical to those of the ‘old’ National Literacy Strategy ‘Searchlights’ model of teaching reading which left some 20% of children (that is one child in five) struggling to read and write, or, illiterate! This is the government-funded provision for the weakest children in Y1, when they have barely begun to learn to read.

In addition, there has been a failure to recognise that not only do dyslexic children benefit from Synthetic Phonics teaching, but that it actually prevents dyslexia, or reading failure, in all but a tiny percentage of children. In consequence, taxpayers money has been spent on a review of 'dyslexia teaching' which concludes that dyslexic children need much the same teaching as that provided by Synthetic Phonics, yet endorses the use of 'specialist programmes' many of which still promote damaging strategies such as the teaching of 'sight words'.

The waters are further muddied by teacher trainers, academics and teachers who cling firmly and loudly to their belief in 'mixed methods' based on Whole Language, blaming the long tail of underachievement in reading on defects in the children who fail.

There is a great deal of information available on this web site for both parents concerned about how their children are being taught to read and teachers wishing to extend their knowledge of Synthetic Phonics.

In addition, there is a lively message board, with international membership, where the finer points of Synthetic Phonics teaching are explored, practical help and advice offered, news of developments in English speaking countries around the world given and friendships formed. We would be delighted if you were to join our on-line community and share your interest, expertise and experiences with us.

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