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Note that items in this Newsletter are by the Editor except where authors are named.

## **Reading Reform Foundation Committee Members**

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Jennifer Chew OBE

Sue Lloyd

Daphne Vivian-Neal

Mike Goodwin

Dr Bonnie Macmillan

Dr Joyce Watson

Sarah Groszek

Prof. Diane McGuinness

Debbie Hepplewhite

Ruth Miskin

## **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.

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### **NEXT ISSUE OF RRF NEWSLETTER**

The next Newsletter is due out in June 2005. Please send contributions by the middle of May. They can be e-mailed to [jennifer@chew8.freeseve.co.uk](mailto:jennifer@chew8.freeseve.co.uk) or sent by post to Mrs J. Chew, The Mount, Malt Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20 9PB.

## EDITORIAL

Two things happened early in 2005 which may be of significance for the reading debate in Britain. One was the completion, on 7 February, of a series of hearings on ‘Teaching children to read’ by the parliamentary Education and Skills Select Committee. I attended two of the three public hearings just to listen in, and was also involved in a private seminar on 26 January. The other event was the publication, just four days after the final Select Committee hearing, of Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson’s ‘The effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment: A seven-year longitudinal study’. This study was published by the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), and is the culmination of work which we first heard about in the 1998 Interchange 57 report ‘Accelerating reading attainment: The effectiveness of synthetic phonics’, published by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department. It is the work which we have all been referring to for years as ‘the Clackmannanshire study’. Clackmannanshire may be the ‘wee county’, but it has made a deservedly big impact. The study received good media coverage in Britain and was apparently mentioned even in New York newspapers.

It seems appropriate to devote much of this Newsletter to the Select Committee hearings and to the Clackmannanshire study, though other items also reinforce the message about the effectiveness of synthetic phonics. We now await the report of the Select Committee. As far as the RRF is concerned, the evidence from Clackmannanshire and elsewhere already indicates that better results are being achieved in schools where children are started off on pure synthetic phonics than in schools using the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) multi-cueing searchlights model, but if the Select Committee is not yet convinced, we hope that its members will at least see that a proper comparison is needed. Unfortunately this will take time, but testing simple context-free decoding at the end of Reception in matched synthetic phonics schools and pure NLS schools would be a quick step in the right direction.

It is worth stressing again that the essence of ‘synthetic’ phonics is its great emphasis on *synthesising* (‘putting together’ or ‘blending’): beginners are taught to read all words they encounter by producing sounds for the letters and blending those sounds. This means that they must be quick and automatic at producing sounds for letters and that the words they are asked to read, for at least the first few weeks, should embody only the letter-sound correspondences taught to date. This may sound narrow, but it is surely not unreasonable, given that many of these children have not yet turned five when they start school and that this approach is strongly supported by research.

The NLS approach, by contrast, has beginners ‘reading’ books from the start, identifying some words by sounding out and blending but (arguably) identifying many more by using context, sight-word recognition, grammar and even pictures. The NLS’s commitment to teaching children to use all these cues was reiterated by the Director of the Primary National Strategy when he appeared before the Select Committee on 8 December. In view of this, the RRF feels justified in continuing to maintain that the NLS approach is markedly different from genuine synthetic phonics. We believe that synthetic phonics is better by a considerable margin, but we shall stand corrected if firm evidence emerges to the contrary. If such evidence does *not* emerge, we shall continue to advocate synthetic phonics as the approach which is not only the most child-friendly for beginners but which also produces the best short- and long-term results.

The Select Committee transcripts and the Clackmannanshire study are both lengthy. My summaries are therefore very selective, and my selection inevitably reflects my own view of what is important. Full transcripts of the Select Committee public hearings are available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmeduski.htm#uncorr>, and the full Johnston and Watson study can be found at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/sptrs-00.asp>.

**Jennifer Chew**

## SELECT COMMITTEE HEARINGS

The following summaries of parliamentary Select Committee hearings are based on the transcripts of the uncorrected oral evidence from 15 November 2004, 8 December 2004 and 7 February 2005. Points made by each witness are grouped together and are not necessarily given in the order in which they were made. Where comments and queries seem appropriate, they are inserted in square brackets.

**Please note that neither witnesses nor Members of Parliament have had the opportunity to correct the record contained in the transcripts, which are therefore ‘not yet an approved formal record of these proceedings’.**

### 15 NOVEMBER 2004

The witnesses on 15 November were Dr Morag Stuart, Reader in Psychology at the London Institute of Education, and Debbie Hepplewhite. Morag Stuart spoke as an academic and a researcher, and Debbie Hepplewhite spoke as a classroom teacher and former editor of the RRF Newsletter.

#### POINTS MADE BY MORAG STUART

Before the advent of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in 1998, there was a widespread view that reading did not need to be taught as children would learn it as naturally as they had earlier learnt to walk and talk. Frank Smith’s ‘mystic pulling powers’ were very influential. [The influence of such apparently bizarre ideas seemed to intrigue Select Committee members – they returned to Frank Smith several times, commenting that the teaching of reading had been changed ‘on a whim’ and that teachers had been trained in the ‘whole language philosophy without any evidence that it worked’.] In one research study carried out by Morag Stuart, ‘the depth of opposition that was around when the NLS came in’ had been shown by the fact that she almost lost one school from the study because the head teacher said that she was ‘ideologically opposed to taking part in a study which showed that phonics teaching worked’. The NLS at least made it clear that reading *does* need to be taught.

Research evidence does *not* show that some children learn differently and benefit from a variety of teaching methods rather than from a firm focus on phonics. This was one of the conclusions of the USA National Reading Panel. As regards the long tail of under-achievement, phonics is particularly beneficial for children from poorer homes and children with English as an additional language. Decoding is very important, particularly in the early stages. ‘You cannot comprehend if you cannot decode.’

We should listen to psychologists, as they are doing the best research: they ‘are all singing from the same song sheet. Psychologists are all saying that children need to understand the alphabetic code and they need to be taught phonics’. But teacher-training institutions show little interest in psychological research: Morag Stuart herself works in one, teaching on Masters’ courses for qualified teachers, but has ‘never been invited to give so much as a single lecture on the initial teacher training course which runs in my own institution’. She *will* be invited in future, however, as the course leader has changed.

[Referring to the ‘searchlights’ model:] The model of reading presented to teachers in the NLS, ‘which is this black hole of four things operating and disappearing into a text, is completely and utterly misleading, and bears no relation to any research on reading that I know of’. [For further details on this, see the paper by Morag Stuart for

the March 2003 DfES phonics seminar. This can be found at [http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/literacy/686807/nls\\_phonics0303mstuart.pdf](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/literacy/686807/nls_phonics0303mstuart.pdf).]

[In response to a question about whether children who seem to learn by osmosis are held back by systematic phonics teaching:] They will not be held back, because the teaching proceeds so quickly – ‘it is not going to damage any child to do 12 weeks of succeeding at something that they can do’. We do not have to teach children every possible phonic correspondence, because most children soon start to infer correspondences for themselves. The children who form the ‘long tail of under-achievement’ probably ‘need continuing support throughout school and not quick bursts of this, that or the other to catch up’ [a reference to the wave 2 and 3 catch-up programmes now in force].

#### **POINTS MADE BY DEBBIE HEPPLEWHITE**

The NLS has indeed put the teaching of reading back on the agenda, but it does not promote the very best teaching methods: phonics teaching is often done incidentally in the context of story-book reading, and this is less effective than targeting letter-sound teaching in such a way that children become automatic at using this strategy for word-reading. Simple fast-paced phonics is quite compatible with an emphasis on comprehension and reading for pleasure. Many people think that children need to use the context and their comprehension of a passage to identify the words, but decoding the words actually brings a greater understanding of the text. Parents are often the sensible ones, recognising that guessing from pictures or from first letters (as promoted in the Early Literacy Support programme) is not reading.

Teachers should not be told what programmes to use, but should be given simple information about different programmes and the results they produce, so that they can make their own informed choices. OFSTED has flagged up the fact that schools with very similar intakes can produce very different results; ‘teachers need to know therefore what other schools are doing which is working so much better’. At present, teachers are not given evidence about NLS programmes which is based on pilot tests with experimental and control groups. Baroness Ashton asked RRF representatives some time ago for a list of schools teaching reading very successfully – ‘we gave her a list and we never heard from her again, so we do not know whether she investigated them’.

In other countries, children are older when they start learning to read, but the age at which they start is probably less important than using the best possible method when they *do* start. [A similar point was also made by Rhona Johnston and Ruth Miskin on 7 February, when the topic of the age of starting school was raised again by Select Committee members.]

[In response to a request for information about the Clackmannanshire study:] ‘They were taught through systematic, fast-paced phonics where children were not taught a sight vocabulary first, they were taught a type of phonics which we call all-through-the-word phonics’ [as distinct from the NLS approach, which has more emphasis on teaching a sight vocabulary and focuses in a more discrete way on initial sounds, then final sounds, then medial sounds]. Earlier Clackmannanshire results, and also results from St Michael’s, Stoke Gifford, have been mentioned in RRF Newsletters.

## 8 DECEMBER 2004

The hearing started with Minister Stephen Twigg being questioned on international comparisons of reading attainment. It was interesting that some tough questions were asked about England's non-participation in the last PISA study: the Select Committee chairman asked whether anyone would be 'reprimanded or sacked', and also asked for reassurance that 'this is not a fix'. Once the focus switched to the teaching of reading, the main witness was Dr Kevan Collins, Director of the Primary National Strategy.

### POINTS MADE BY KEVAN COLLINS

[In response to questions about the research behind the NLS and the 'searchlights' model:] A seminal piece of research drawn on by the NLS team was Marilyn Jager Adams's review of research [*Beginning to read: Thinking and Learning about print*, 1990 – but see \* on next page]. The searchlights model was devised by three or four people drawing on the work of Rumelhart, Marie Clay, Priestley [Pressley?] and the comprehension theorists. 'It is a visual representation of the view that good readers attend to an array of information, and the priority of information when children are young is developing the phonic knowledge. But equally children are active learners and they will, and should, use other knowledge that is available'. [The RRF would argue, however, that the searchlights model does not make it clear that phonics is the priority at the beginning. Rather, it suggests that phonics is only ever one part of what Dr Collins calls 'an array of information' needed for word-identification. Dr Collins said that he was a 'great fan' of Morag Stuart's, but did not mention the criticisms she had made of the searchlights model in her paper for the 2003 DfES seminar.]

The NLS approach is to teach sight-words as well as phonics, and also to encourage children to use the other searchlights: 'They bring their knowledge of phonics to get the first consonant. The dominant consonant is the first thing and they get to bits of the word. They use other information – the context, maybe the picture, the evolving story. They use their syntactic knowledge, the kind of grammar and pattern of English, and they use their graphic knowledge.' [Again, see \* on next page, and see pages 14 and 15 of Ruth Miskin's article in this Newsletter.] The NLS does not believe in limiting texts encountered by children to material which they can decode phonically. [It should be noted that not all synthetic phonics programmes use decodable books, but a factor common to Clackmannanshire's *Fast Phonics First*, *Jolly Phonics* and *Read Write Inc.* is that they all have a period at the beginning when the children themselves are not expected to do any *book*-reading at all.]

'The basic decoding, the cvc is part of reception teaching', but it is not known what percentage of children can manage this by the end of reception. [Finding these figures out for properly matched systematic synthetic phonics schools and pure NLS schools at the end of the current school year might be a very good place for a comparative study to start.]

[In response to a statement by Mr Nick Gibb, M.P., that seven-year-olds could often be seen guessing words, pretending to read, and floundering without a picture:] 'I would be appalled if I saw a seven-year-old just guessing words.' [But children *are* guessing, and they are doing it because guessing is in effect written into some NLS 'scripts' – in the Early Literacy Support video, for example, the teacher Andrew holds the book in such a way at times that only the picture is visible and suggests that the children use the picture to work out what the words are.]

#### **POINT MADE BY THE SELECT COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN**

The committee had heard evidence of a ‘kind of ideological purism’ that ‘phonics is the only way... the one faith, the true faith, the only faith’, but the NLS seemed to represent the ‘more pragmatic view... that a child should be given phonics but a range of other entries into learning to read’. [Synthetic phonics advocates can understand how this ‘ideological purism’ attitude arises, but would point out that they teach phonics so fast and intensively that it is only a matter of weeks before most children know enough phonics to read age-appropriate books. Research does not support the view that children should be given a range of other *entries* into learning to read – see, again, \* below. Research supports the view that children’s entry into reading should be through learning to decode phonically – two of the ‘searchlights’ (context and grammatical knowledge) should be used for comprehension *after* the words have been decoded, and the other (‘word recognition and graphic knowledge’) is in fact best acquired via the decoding route.]

\*Many of us would never have thought of Marilyn Jager Adams’s work as having supported the NLS searchlights model type of approach. As it happens, her opposition to teaching children to use several different cueing systems has recently been made clear in an article published by the Canadian ‘Organisation for Quality Education’ in December 2004 – coincidentally this appeared very close in time to the 8 December hearing. This article is entitled ‘Two Solitudes’, and has the subheading ‘The three-cueing system is popular with teachers, but researchers are barely aware of it’. Adams would not, it seems, be happy about claims that the searchlights model (in effect a four-cueing system rather than a three-cueing one) is based on her work.

#### **7 FEBRUARY 2005**

The witnesses were Rhona Johnston, Professor of Psychology at the University of Hull and Clackmannanshire researcher, Sue Lloyd, co-author of *Jolly Phonics*, and Ruth Miskin, author of *Best Practice Phonics* and *Read Write Inc.*

#### **POINTS MADE BY RHONA JOHNSTON**

‘In the early stages it [synthetic phonics] suits the children’s developmental level. We do not give children conflicting cues. We do not say, “Guess from text what it [the word] is”. They are told, “When you come across an unfamiliar word, sound and blend it and work out what it is”’.

[Responding to a question about the kind of research needed to show different results being produced by different methods:] That was the type of research done in Clackmannanshire, and it showed synthetic phonics children doing better than control groups, one of which was taught in a way resembling the NLS’s *Progression in Phonics*.

‘There is no doubt that it [synthetic phonics] must be the first thing that you do.’ In the Clackmannanshire study, the children in the experimental groups were given synthetic phonics teaching in the first 16 weeks, and then the same teaching was given to the control groups in the second 16 weeks. At the end of the second year of school, girls were better readers if they had done synthetic phonics early rather than later, and both boys and girls were better spellers if they had done synthetic phonics early. [The point about starting in the right way was also made explicitly by Ruth Miskin: ‘When you decide to teach a child to read, you have to get it right first time.’]

‘Education is not very evidence-based’ – people are bowled over by charismatic figures such as Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman, and their approaches are rolled out into schools even though no research has shown them to be effective. ‘There has in fact been a huge amount of research on phonics teaching ... The research has actually been there a long time, but the research was not telling people what they wanted to see and it was ignored really by educationists.’ Holland, Austria, Germany and Spain all use synthetic phonics, but even in these countries whole-language methods have had some influence.

[In response to a question from the Chairman about whether a piece of research was needed which would compare NLS-taught children with a closely-matched group of synthetic phonics-taught children:] ‘Yes, I think that absolutely needs to be done to establish what the facts are. I should stress that my research has been paid for entirely by the Scottish government... We were invited by Clackmannanshire to do the study, but that money was only given out if they did pre-tests and post-tests of an experimental and a control group using standardised tests. This is what I think should happen in England.’ [This was the last witness comment made in this session, and it is very much to be hoped that the suggestion will be followed up.]

#### **POINTS MADE BY SUE LLOYD**

A big rise in reading standards accompanied her school’s move from a look-and-say approach to a synthetic phonics approach in the 1970s – the teachers were the same and the children were from the same areas, but the school’s average quotient on county standardised reading tests went from 102 to 110+. The local education authority was told, but showed no interest. Synthetic phonics starts by teaching children a few letter-sounds and teaching them to blend those sounds into words. The NLS gets the children to read books very early on and encourages children to use strategies that synthetic phonics teachers don’t approve of, such as, ‘Look at the picture to help you read the word’ and ‘Try to guess what it is, try to predict what it might be’.

[In response to questions about how the NLS could have raised standards:] Some phonics is better than no phonics, and the NLS has introduced some phonics, which has led to improvements. But when the results produced by the pilot National Literacy Project were published by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), they showed that schools using this approach had not even brought the children up to an average standard. Getting children to read books before they are ready is putting the cart before the horse. It is better to read aloud to them and to talk about the stories. [See also Ruth Miskin’s article in this Newsletter.]

[In response to an MP’s suggestion that we all use prediction when reading:] Prediction for comprehension purposes is acceptable, but prediction for word-identification purposes is not. [An attempt to convey this point was made in the NLS paper ‘Teaching Phonics in the National Literacy Strategy’ for the March 2003 DfES seminar, as Victoria Robinson points out on page 21 of this Newsletter, but the misunderstanding underlying the MP’s question is still common.]

An example of the success of synthetic phonics can be seen in the 2004 Key Stage 2 results of a large primary school in a relatively poor area, where 94% of children achieved Level 4 or above in English (national figure 77%) and 65% achieved Level 5 (national figure 26%). Boys and girls did equally well, and no children with English as an additional language were on the Special Educational Needs register.

Schools may use published synthetic phonics programmes, but they often feel obliged also to follow the NLS ‘because all their literacy consultants are telling them that the National Literacy Strategy is the one that is most important’. ‘The DfES has taken the high ground, and said, “Well, we know better”. Yet there is no evidence that their programmes are better.’ The NFER report on the National Literacy Project showed children not even reaching the national average quotient of 100. The Early Literacy Support programme, aimed at children with difficulties, has not been tested at all and is not supported by research. All this is very different from the scientific work carried out by people like Rhona Johnston.

[In response to the Chairman’s question, ‘Are you saying that of all the departments of education which do so much research, no one has properly evaluated the value of phonics against other methods of teaching children to read?’:] Yes. Programmes have been put out into the whole of the country without being properly tested.

We don’t really know whether a pure NLS approach is producing good results even in leafy suburbs. Kevan Collins claimed that NLS schools in Tower Hamlets [not a leafy suburb] were getting better results than synthetic phonics schools, but in fact these Tower Hamlets schools turned out to be using synthetic phonics programmes. [The point is that as long as schools are using synthetic phonics programmes *at all*, even unsystematically, it is impossible to tell exactly how much children’s performance is the result of NLS teaching and how much is the result of synthetic phonics teaching.]

#### **POINTS MADE BY RUTH MISKIN**

Children need to be able to decode effortlessly. ‘If you have to work very hard at every single word that you come across, asking yourself, “Shall I use a picture cue? Shall I use a context cue? Shall I use a picture cue with a letter cue?...”, the child cannot make that decision while they are reading.’ The NLS represents a compromise, with attempts to placate lobbies representing different sorts of phonics [analytic, synthetic, onset-rime], ‘real books’, etc. A problem is that some children may be still unable to read but may be spending 100 minutes a week trying to follow discussions about plot, characterisation, settings, author’s craft etc.

Phonics doesn’t have to be deadly dull. It can be fun, and the children enjoy being successful. Phonics is much more complicated in English than in other languages, but synthetic phonics starts with the transparent part of the alphabetic code and only then introduces the more complex part. The ‘kn’ spelling for the /n/ sound in the word ‘know’ is one of the complexities, but it is still phonics. Alongside this cumulative teaching of the code, however, teachers are immersing children in literature, but by reading aloud to them rather than by expecting them to read books to themselves. Parents often do things with their children that do not fit in fully with a synthetic phonics approach, but what parents do should never be denigrated. ‘Parents sometimes say, however, “Will you show me what you do at school, so that when we do help we are talking with the same voice”, and then I show them.’

[In answer to a question about whether Kevan Collins had been right, in the seminar of 26 January, to say that a lot of Tower Hamlets schools did well in teaching reading using the NLS scheme:] Enquiries have shown that every school in Tower Hamlets has adopted a synthetic phonics approach – either Ruth Miskin’s or Sue Lloyd’s. Schools say that they have not followed all the NLS programmes which have been brought out, ‘so Kevan was wrong’.

In deprived areas, and particularly if parents don't speak much English, no one may hear a child reading at home. If the child simply recites a book that he has memorised (e.g. one child boasted, 'I can do it with my eyes shut, I'm that good'), parents may not realise that this is what is happening. Inner-city areas are often still the ones where teachers believe in getting children to guess from pictures and context – the teachers say, 'We've been taught on a multiple-cueing system', meaning picture-cue, context, grammar... Publishers are actually producing books which encourage this.

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Representatives of the National Literacy Trust and the Early Childhood Forum also gave evidence on 7 February. Points made by them will be only very briefly summarised, without individual witnesses being identified.

There was general support for phonics, but within limits. There was also support, in effect, for 'emergent literacy': e.g. it was suggested that babies looking at symbols on cots and children looking at the print on cereal packets were 'reading'. Children don't suddenly become 'literate' when they go to school. All witnesses supported the idea of good nursery provision.

Reservations were expressed about pushing the NLS down into the Foundation Stage. One of the less good effects of the NLS has been a reduction in the amount that teachers read aloud to children. [Synthetic phonics advocates would probably agree: they believe that reading aloud to children is a better way to inculcate an interest in books than is the practice of getting children to try and read to themselves before they are ready.] The Early Childhood Forum had evidently said, in a written submission, that phonics should not be introduced in the early years – another representative disagreed with this, but said that what she was against was 'these rather formal "b-a-t" things, which send shivers down the spines of most of us'. All children learn differently, so we need a variety of approaches; we also need a cradle-to-grave, inter-generational approach to literacy.

Kathy Sylva's work has shown that nursery education gives children a very good start, but 'we need to go on and see how they are reading at 12 and 14. My gut feeling, and that is not good enough of course,... is that the children who have that kind of experience are the ones who love to learn'. [The RRF would agree that gut feeling is *not* good enough. Media coverage of the Clackmannanshire study suggested that children 'love to learn' synthetic phonics.]

Towards the end, some very searching questions were asked about whether children who could decode mechanically were more or less motivated to read than children who could not decode mechanically. The witness thought that children decoding mechanically would be less motivated, but knew of no scientific evidence supporting this. It also became clear that two of the witnesses had not read any of the Clackmannanshire research, and the other two had read some of it but only some time ago. [Note that it would have been impossible for anyone to have read the most recent report, as this did not come out until four days after this Select Committee hearing. Nevertheless earlier Clackmannanshire findings were very significant, and had been available on the DfES website since August 2003, when they were published as one of the papers presented at the March 2003 DfES seminar.]

There was also a Select Committee seminar on 26 January, but as this was private it is not possible to report on it.

**THE JOHNSTON AND WATSON CLACKMANNANSHIRE RESEARCH:  
‘THE EFFECTS OF SYNTHETIC PHONICS TEACHING ON READING AND  
SPELLING ATTAINMENT: A SEVEN YEAR LONGITUDINAL STUDY’**

As stated above, this study was published on 11 February, four days after the final Select Committee hearing. The authors are Prof. Rhona Johnston (University of Hull) and Dr Joyce Watson (University of St Andrews). RRF readers will no doubt be familiar with previous findings. The new element is the findings relating to the performance of children at the end of their primary schooling.

As a reminder: The study had started seven years previously, with experimental and control groups, each spread over several schools. The experimental groups were given 16 weeks of intensive synthetic phonics teaching, starting after the first month of school. During those 16 weeks, the control groups were given the more analytic type of phonics teaching which is typically found in Scottish schools, where some sight-word learning precedes letter-sound teaching and the emphasis is at first only on initial letters and sounds. One control group also received ‘systematic phonemic awareness teaching without reference to print’. This was done to test the theory that discrete phonological awareness training is important. After the first 16 weeks, the experimental groups were reading and spelling so much better than the control groups that it was considered unethical to withhold the synthetic phonics programme from the control groups, so they received it in their second 16 weeks at school. From then on, it was impossible to maintain separate experimental and control groups.

At the end of their primary schooling, the children who had had synthetic phonics either in the first 16 weeks or the second 16 weeks were 3 years 6 months above chronological age in word-reading ability, 1 year 8 months above chronological age in spelling ability, and 3.5 months above chronological age in comprehension ability. The comprehension score may look a little disappointing, but the researchers point out that the children were from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds, that their receptive vocabulary score was below average (they had an average standard score of 93, as compared with a national average of 100), and that comprehension scores are more difficult to raise than word-reading scores.

Boys generally did as well as or better than girls. Children from disadvantaged homes did as well as others in reading and spelling until Primary 7 (the equivalent of Year 6 in England), and even in Primary 7 their word-reading lag was only ‘marginally significant’. Relatively few children were reading and spelling more than two years below chronological age, which is a frequently-used criterion of under-achievement. A fascinating case study is given of ‘AF’, who was given extra help because of severe problems, and who ended up with a word-reading age 9 months above his chronological age.

Teachers were very positive about the programme. They felt that ‘reading, spelling and writing skills had been greatly accelerated by the programme’ and that they were able to detect children needing learning support much earlier.

It is impossible to do justice to the Clackmannanshire research in a short space, and readers are strongly recommended to read the full study at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/sptrs-00.asp>.

## MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE CLACKMANNANSHIRE STUDY

FRIDAY 11 FEBRUARY

**BBC1 News at 1 p.m. and 6 p.m.** The head teacher at Menstrie Primary School, Ronnie O’Grady, was interviewed, and said, ‘I’m delighted with the results, because in 35 years of teaching I’ve never seen children so enthusiastic and such success being sustained right through to the 11- and 12-year-olds at the top of the school.’ ‘But,’ said the presenter, ‘officials in England deny they’re using the wrong strategy. Like at this school in London, they recommend a range of approaches to learning to read, arguing different strategies work for different children.’

We then saw Sue Hayward, head teacher of Sir John Lillie Primary School, saying, ‘We’re not locked into any strategy whatsoever. We will use absolutely anything to encourage our children to read and to be interested in printed words and to use that language, whether it be building the words up from picture-cues and flashcards, or building the words up using individual letter-sounds and putting them together and blending the sounds together.’ This commitment to eclecticism surely remains very common among teachers – understandably, because it is what seems to be encouraged by the NLS. Certain questions need to be answered, however: Are these methods producing children who, by the age of eleven, have word-reading skills more than three years above chronological age on average and spelling skills nearly two years above chronological age? Have schools teaching in this way reduced the long tail of under-achievement as much as it has been reduced in Clackmannanshire? If so, well and good. If not, why not?

**Radio 4, ‘PM’ programme.** The interviewer’s introduction mentioned the fast pace of synthetic phonics and the fact that children were taught to blend all through the word. Rhona Johnston said that just a few letter-sounds were taught at first (e.g. /a/, /t/, /p/) and that children were immediately taught how to read words by blending, with magnetic letters being pushed together to reinforce the point. The method has a particularly large effect in areas of deprivation. Nick Gibb, a Conservative Member of Parliament who is a member of the Education and Skills Select Committee, confirmed that the approach was getting very good results, and compared it with the NLS’s way of getting children to guess at words using pictures and story context: ‘This is no way to teach children to read, which is why we have such a long tail of under-achievement in literacy in this country...The Government needs to refocus the National Literacy Strategy so that it has synthetic phonics at its core, and we also need to change the way teachers are taught to teach in the teacher-training colleges, because that’s where the problem begins.’

The interviewer quoted part of a statement issued by the Education Department: ‘Schools are already adopting this approach. The National Literacy Strategy...has from the start promoted a model for teaching which places a clear emphasis on instruction in phonics, but complements this with the teaching of other reading strategies such as word-recognition, graphic knowledge and grammatical and contextual knowledge.’ Nick Gibb said that there was actually ‘only a small amount of synthetic phonics, and it’s these other methods that confuse children, asking them to guess words in the context of a picture or a story. Now this study [Clackmannanshire] actually tested the synthetic phonics method against the National Literacy Strategy type of method of teaching reading, and it found that by the age of eleven children taught synthetic phonics were three and a half years ahead in their reading age.’ They were reading at 14+-year-old level despite the fact that they were

below average in vocabulary – if they had been taught the NLS way they would have had a reading age of only eleven.

Mr Gibb concluded, ‘This is a staggeringly better way of teaching reading. This study has been around for a long time, and it is a disgrace that those in charge of the National Literacy Strategy are putting out misleading statements like that, and they haven’t used this research to change the way our children are taught to read.’

**BBC2, ‘Newsnight’.** About ten minutes were devoted to synthetic phonics. Gavin Esler started by mentioning the Clackmannanshire study, saying, ‘The results of the study seem so convincing that we wondered why synthetic phonics is not at the core of every reading programme in Britain.’

Rhona Johnston: ‘Instead of the results trailing away, which quite often happens in these intervention studies, in fact the effects have got much larger, and when we tested last summer, we found the children reading 42 months ahead of chronological age, and that’s up from 7 months in their first year at school.’

The head teacher of Elmhurst School, which has started using Ruth Miskin’s programme, spoke eloquently of children’s ability to read unfamiliar words by blending, and of their increased confidence and self-esteem. This is a large inner-city school in which 95% of children have English as an additional language, 40-45% are on free school meals, many children are from refugee backgrounds and there is high mobility. But the school does not make any of these factors an excuse for the children not learning to read. We saw a delightful clip of a little girl being asked by the interviewer how she had read the word ‘sent’: ‘Fred Talk’, she replied. (See pages 15 and 17 of Ruth Miskin’s article in this Newsletter.) ‘Fred Talk? How does that go?’, asked the interviewer. The child sounded out, ‘/s/ - /e/ - /n/ - /t/ – sent’.

The presenter reported that the number of 11-year-olds reaching the required standard nationally was now up to 78%, ‘but a significant proportion are going on to secondary school either struggling or completely unable to read’. The National Literacy Strategy ‘tries to equip children with lots of what it calls “searchlights” to illuminate the text. Children are told to try using not just phonics to discover an unfamiliar word but also its context (what the words around it mean, the shape of the word, and other clues like pictures.’ Rhona Johnston: ‘These approaches actually conflict. What should a child do when it comes across a word it doesn’t know? Should it be trying to sound and blend it? Should it be guessing from context? Should it be looking at pictures for clues? Synthetic phonics is very clear on that: faced with an unfamiliar word, the child should try to sound and blend it.’ Presenter: the NLS people ‘still say that giving children many ways of accessing a text is better than giving them just one way’.

There was then a brief interview with Kevan Collins, Director of the Primary National Strategy. ‘Children become confused, in my view, when they can’t make the right choices, when they can’t determine which is the right strategy to use...Now I want the children to believe themselves to be confident and effective readers, and they’re trying all sorts of things, because the children are active learners. When they’re in the classroom, I can control some of the texts that they get, but I think children become confused not because they’ve got too much but when they don’t know which strategy to select.’ [This point about children being ‘confused’ seemed to be the same as one made by Rhona Johnston, but she was critical of this aspect of the NLS whereas Kevan Collins seemed to be defending it. Is there evidence that children *can* usually determine which of the NLS searchlights strategies to use and thus avoid confusion?]

We then had a clip of Debbie Hepplewhite. ‘At one stage in the history of the teaching of reading there was something called phonicsphobia, where people just associated phonics with deadly dull drill and kill. In actual fact, the good synthetic phonics programmes are the furthest thing away from deadly dull drill and kill that you can imagine, and the children love them. And because it *is* researched, and because it *is* appropriate for little children, they are empowered by this method to read very early, and they’re very thrilled by it.’ [It was good to have this point about children’s enjoyment being made, and it linked in well with the comments made by the heads of Menstrie and Elmhurst schools. People need to realise that synthetic phonics, far from being a killjoy approach, actually produces children who are happy, fulfilled and confident.]

Gavin Esler finished by announcing, ‘On the day the Prime Minister unveiled, as one of his new pledges, “Your child achieving more”, we naturally wanted an education minister in London or someone from OFSTED to talk about the phonics report, but unfortunately they refused our invitation.’

#### **SATURDAY 12 FEBRUARY**

***The Daily Telegraph.*** There were two articles, both by Liz Lightfoot. The first gave factual information about the Clackmannanshire study and included pictures of Reception children at St Michael’s School, Stoke Gifford, which uses *Jolly Phonics* and *Sound Discovery* (see Marlynne Grant’s article in Newsletter 52). Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector of Schools, was mentioned as having strongly advised a synthetic phonics strategy when the literacy hour was being planned in 1997 but as having been overruled. ‘It was the message I tried to get across, but David Blunkett and Prof. Michael Barber [in charge of bringing in the strategy] refused to listen and relied on the wisdom of the so-called experts who had been responsible for reading failure in the first place.’ [Alas, too true!]

The other article was a touching account of the experience which Liz Lightfoot’s twins, John and Jamie, had when they started school in 1997 and were taught by whole-word and whole-language methods. She could see that this was not working well and resorted to teaching them herself, using *Jolly Phonics*. Their school, however, continued to use non-phonetic methods, and John became discouraged when told off by his teacher for ‘relying too heavily on phonics to decipher new words’. Jamie, however, was much more willing to persist with phonics, and ‘it gave him an advantage in English which he held over his brother for the rest of their time in primary school’.

***The Times.*** An article by Gillian Harris and Tony Halpin gave good factual coverage to the Clackmannanshire study, mentioning that ‘the technique was also backed by Peter Peacock, the Scottish Education Minister, who said that he wanted schools across the country to consider adopting the synthetic phonics method’. In addition, there was an excellent leading article, explaining that whereas synthetic phonics ‘teaches children the building block sounds made by letters or groups of letters which make up words’, analytic phonics ‘encourages children to recognise whole words from the start, to use grammatical structure to identify words, and to guess words from their context’. The article concluded, ‘But to plunge them straight into the deep end is expecting them to swim before they can paddle, or solve equations before they have learnt their tables. Reading is one of the greatest human pleasures and most important skills. So listen carefully to the words being pronounced by the wise teachers of Clackmannanshire.’

## SUNDAY 20 FEBRUARY

***The Mail on Sunday.*** The columnist Peter Hitchens referred to the research which ‘showed that what is nowadays known as “synthetic phonics” is hugely more effective than the so-called “mixture of methods” used in the Government’s laughable National Literacy Strategy’. Hitchens was one of the few journalists not to say that what is now called ‘synthetic’ phonics is new and pioneering: it had been known about since the nineteenth century and was in effect recommended in Rudolph Flesch’s 1955 book *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. He mentioned that even the new Clackmannanshire report ‘was, in fact, a follow-up of work done five years ago which showed exactly the same thing’. ‘So why is this Government, which pretends to be so worried about education, flatly ignoring more than a century of experience combined with modern research?’

***The Observer.*** Geraldine Bedell mentioned that in Clackmannanshire ‘the boys, unusually, outperformed girls. And the children who made the most marked improvement were those from disadvantaged homes’. She reported that Nick Gibb, M.P for Bognor and Littlehampton, had written to Ruth Kelly (Secretary of State for Education) ‘asking whether she now intends to review the national literacy strategy in the light of this evidence’. Bedell pointed out that one great advantage of synthetic phonics is that ‘it teaches the “decoding” part of reading quickly, in 16 weeks, freeing children to get on with the more interesting comprehending part of reading’, whereas the NLS stretches out the teaching of decoding over years and dilutes it by teaching other strategies. ‘As the government contemplates its plans for a third term, it might be useful if ministers made use of their own educations and opened their minds a bit. While the educational establishment clings to its shibboleths and a misplaced anti-traditionalism, children are being denied opportunities; often, they are the very children that a Labour government should be most seeking to help’.

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### ARE STANDARDS REALLY RISING?

An article by Prof. Peter Tymms of the University of Durham, which was published in the *British Educational Research Journal* Vol. 30 No. 4 in August 2004, raised serious questions about whether standards have risen as much as the national test results suggest. Where researchers, including his own team at Durham, have carried out independent testing, they have found little or no improvement in standards.

Prof. Tymms presented his case to the Statistics Commission which, according to *The Daily Telegraph* of 18 February, is ‘an independent body set up by the Government to “help ensure that official statistics are trustworthy”’. The *Telegraph* reported that this body was now also ‘satisfied that standards had not improved as much as the test scores suggested’, and that Prof. Tymms had ‘welcomed the ruling, saying he no longer felt “like a lone academic whistling in the wind”. “We need an independent body to monitor standards over time. It’s not a task that the national tests can perform because the test scores move for reasons that have nothing to do with the standards that the children taking them have reached”’.

Clearly, any drive to raise standards requires tests which reliably measure whatever changes occur.

## COMPREHENDING DECODING

### Ruth Miskin

Anyone that knows anything about reading must have read reports on the Clackmannanshire research with an appalling sense of *déjà vu*. This research showed that after only 16 weeks of synthetic phonics teaching children were reading seven months above chronological age. Seven years later, with no further systematic synthetic phonics, their word-reading ability was three and a half years above chronological age.

Do we really need more research to tell us that boys, EAL children, children from poorer families – indeed all children – learn to read more quickly when they are taught systematically and intensively using synthetic phonics? (Synthetic phonics is simply the ability to convert a letter or letter group into sounds that are then blended together into a word.)

Once a child can work out the words (decode) he can then begin to sort out the message (comprehend). If he can't decode the words, he can't begin to understand.

If on the other hand he can decode efficiently, he is likely to understand a text which he would previously have understood if it had been read aloud to him. In other words, with *simple* children's texts, good decoding is usually sufficient to ensure good comprehension.

The easier a child finds decoding, the more he will read and the more he will enjoy reading. The more he reads, the more challenging material he is likely to read. He will start to read more complex texts which include vocabulary he would not otherwise have come across. He will constantly ask 'What does this mean?' His knowledge of words and therefore his understanding of the world will increase. The more he learns the more he wants to find out.

The child who finds reading difficult does not ask, 'What does this word mean?' He asks, 'What is this word?'

Imagine you are five years old. Your teacher has chosen a book for you to read.

On the first page you come to a word you can't read.

You know the first letter but not the rest of the word.

Should you guess the word from the picture? No, of course not, because only nouns have pictures.

Should you read on to the next word and try to guess the word using the word before the word you can't read to help you? No. There are too many possible choices to guess, even if you understood what you were reading in the first place.

Should you guess by using a grammatical cue? No. You need to have a very strong grammatical sense and understanding even to think about using this one.

If you have floundered around pursuing these false solutions it is very unlikely that you will ask what the word means. You can't ask what the word means because you don't know what the word is. You are so lost that you don't know where to begin. You switch off and look at the teacher's face, hoping for clues in her eyes. The

teacher may now be showing frustration in her eyes. You start worrying that she thinks you are not very bright.

You hope if you pause long enough and look worried enough the teacher will tell you the word.

Unfortunately in the next sentence the same thing happens. And again.

You think about how hard life is now you've started school and ask 'Can I go now, please?'

You take home a colour-coded simple book that you know so well you don't even have to look at the words. At least you don't have to use any picture, context or graphic cues.

During my three years of training teachers in my programme, I have, more or less, the same discussions wherever I go: the arguments given by teachers show that they are locked into a National Literacy Strategy mindset.

Teacher: But your system doesn't encourage children to use a range of cues.

Me: Absolutely, I want the child to decode every word quickly, without hesitation.

Teacher: But they won't know how to use picture cues, or context cues or syntactic cues.

Me: Why would I want them to?

Teacher: Because you can't work every word out using phonics.

Me: That's because the books you give them don't have a strong cumulative phonic structure, so the child has got to use his guessing cues.

Teacher: It's informed guessing.

Me: It's still guessing. It's not decoding. They know they've guessed, so they don't really know if they know.

Our books give children success because they can decode every word except the 'red words'. (We print the few common undecodable words in red so that the child knows he can't use 'Fred Talk' – sounding out grapheme-by-grapheme.) They know they know the words.

While your child is playing a guessing game, my child has read the whole page.

Teacher: But doesn't that mean he will be good just at decoding?

Me: When a child can decode any word efficiently, he can devote all his conscious attention to comprehension. He then asks questions about the words he doesn't understand. All his energies are concentrated on getting to the heart of the passage. He's not in the word any more, he's in the world of comprehension.

Teacher: But he will only be able to read phonically decodable texts.

Me: He will be able to read anything when he has cracked the complex alphabetic code (when he has learned more than one spelling for a given sound). As the Clackmannanshire research shows, the effects of synthetic phonics are cumulative;

after seven years, children are reading words three and a half years ahead of their chronological age.

Teacher: But when does a child's comprehension catch up with this ability to decode?

Me: Never. Adults read words they don't understand. We ask, 'What does this word mean? But we can only do this when we use our knowledge of sound-graphemes to pronounce a word such as 'pleurothotonos'.

We decode a complex medical word, maybe with an incorrect pronunciation, and then work out what it might mean in the light of the sentence. We use the context to work out the possible *meaning* of the word.

*The crippled old man leaned heavily to the left. At first I thought he was drunk, but then I realised he was suffering from pleurothotonos.*

The clarity of the above became obvious to me when I was teaching children with English as an additional language in Whitechapel. I also read so much research that said exactly the same thing.

Given that most parents could not read English, I could not assume there was someone to help at home. The more quickly these children learnt to decode, the more time we spent on helping children comprehend new words and stories. The results were remarkable. Many children were reading advanced children's fiction by the age of 7. Of course there were a few children to whom every year we gave extra support – but they all learnt to read.

I stopped being a headteacher three years ago and wrote a reading programme. Over these years I have worked with many schools to develop and improve the programme so that it can be implemented quickly and easily.

I have learnt, however, that it's not just *what you do*, it's *how you do it* that also matters hugely. The same programme can go into one school and get quite good results and into others and get fantastic results.

In the end it is down to the head teacher. If the head teacher wants the programme to work, it will work. A good synthetic programme with a good team of staff leads to successful readers.

*What we do:*

- *Read Write Inc.* is an inclusive literacy programme for all children reading at National Curriculum level 2b or below. It is also suitable for children in older year groups who have significant learning difficulties, including specific literacy problems.

(We have a programme for children in Years 5, 6 and 7 who are reading below the National Curriculum level 2a, which uses age-appropriate text.)

The Read Write Inc. programmes teach reading and writing. However talking is a critical and integral element of the programme. There is no bolt-on 'speaking and listening'.

## READING

The children:

- learn 44 ‘speed’ sounds and the corresponding letters/letter groups using simple picture prompts.  
These are taught over a short period of time in short, intensive and, importantly, fun lessons. No games are used – just good purposeful teaching. Phonics is for reading and spelling – not playing games.
- learn to read words using sound-blending known as ‘Fred Talk’.  
Fred can only speak single-syllabic words in pure sounds. He shows the children how to sound-blend. He does this all through the d-ay.
- read lively stories featuring words they have learned to sound out.  
The Storybooks have been written by Gill Munton, a talented and experienced author. When you read Gill’s stories, you forget that you are reading a text with a strong phonic structure. The language is natural and fluent and each story has a clear shape. Humour is a strong feature – children want to read the books again and again.
- show that they comprehend the stories by answering ‘Find It’ and ‘Prove It’ discussion questions.  
As soon as children can decode the story with accuracy, we teach them to comprehend the story through partner discussion. Children are taught to ask questions and then answer them with a partner. They are taught both to answer simple literal ‘on the page’ questions and inferential questions that are ‘between the lines’. Children are asked to justify their answers and opinions by looking for evidence in the text. They do this from the earliest texts so they learn to comprehend what they read from the very beginning.

## WRITING

The children:

- learn to write the letters/letter groups which represent the 44 sounds.  
They learn to hand-write using simple cues and ‘sound-write’ in rhythms. They learn to write words by saying the sounds and graphemes.  
Children sound out each syllable in Fred Talk as they touch their ‘Fred fingers’.  
(They also learn to write ‘red words’ from memory.) As their phonic knowledge increases, they make grapheme choices from the Speed sound poster.
- write simple sentences.  
Children learn to ‘hold a sentence’ in their head before writing it down. These sentences include words we know the children can sound out. They learn to compose ‘build-it’ sentences, orally, using new vocabulary.
- compose stories based on picture strips.  
We help children compose sentences before they write using illustrations from the stories.
- compose a range of texts using discussion prompts.  
We provide the teacher with discussion prompts to develop a wide range of writing.

## TALKING

Children are assessed, so they work with children at the same level. This allows them to take a full part in all lessons.

They work in pairs so that they:

- answer every question
- practise every activity with their partner
- take turns in talking to each other.

We want children to take a full part in all the lessons, so all children answer every question. Responsibility for talking is not an optional extra; we should expect children to talk in the same way as we expect them to read and write.

After all, we learn so much of what we discuss with another person and to teach gives mastery. In this programme we teach the children to teach reading.



*How it works:*

- The systematic and lively programme is organised by an in-school manager. If this programme is to succeed it has, like anything else, to be managed properly. We ask the headteacher to select an excellent teacher who has the key qualities of enthusiasm and relentlessness. This teacher supports assistants and inexperienced teachers to implement the programme to the highest standards. The manager gets to know the day-to-day progress of every child who is learning to read.
- All staff (teachers and assistants) are trained together by one of our trainers who has taught and managed the programme (no cascade training is used) When every member of staff (including the headteacher) knows how to teach the programme they all start to speak with one voice. Everyone has a shared knowledge and understanding of how children learn to read using the same programme. This means that staff support each other.
- The children read and write for an hour each day, grouped according to their reading level (two 20-minute sessions for Reception children). This, perhaps, is the most critical part of the programme. The greater the homogeneity of the group, the more focused the teaching and the faster the progress of the children. When children work at their own reading level every day for an hour, they are bound to make more progress than if they were reading at their level for a mere 20 minutes a week. Every reading teacher knows that it is impossible to support very poor readers and extend fluent readers at the same time. You cannot meet the needs of all children if some can't read the book.
- Children work with a partner to practise what they have been taught. This means that all children participate during the whole lesson; there is no 'down time'.

The cumulative effect of learning to read and write, talking about the books and teaching each other has improved children's confidence immeasurably. Children who were shy and too afraid to speak out in front of the class talk confidently with a partner.

Some schools start in a small way, using Read Write Inc. as a ‘Wave 3’ programme whereby groups of teachers from different schools are trained together.

However, when a whole school really works well together the results can be impressive. One school in Walsall gained 41% more seven year old children achieving Level 2b at Key Stage 1 in 9 months. Most schools have increased the same scores by well over 20%.

Schools to visit are listed on our website

[www.ruthmiskinliteracy.com](http://www.ruthmiskinliteracy.com)

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## **PHONICS: WHERE HAS THE NATIONAL LITERACY STRATEGY REALLY GOT TO?**

**Victoria Robinson**

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is surprisingly difficult to work out what the DfES is really currently recommending as best practice in the teaching of literacy and of phonics in particular. This note draws on relevant recent publications by the DfES and OFSTED to clarify the current official thinking on best practice in the teaching of literacy in primary schools.

The NLS has been confused from the outset, mainly because of politics within the DfES and the academic establishment. There are many people in the DfES and in university education departments who were trained in the whole language and analytic phonics methods and who could not bring themselves to drop these methods even in the face of much solid evidence that a ‘pure’ synthetic phonics approach to teaching literacy is significantly more effective for virtually all children. The NLS ‘eclectic’ approach was devised to fudge the issue, promoting multiple reading strategies to be taught in parallel, so that the proponents of each method could find and teach what they wanted. The pamphlet ‘An End to Illiteracy’, by Tom Burkard of the Promethean Trust, is excellent for background on the ‘reading wars’ and how they have affected the development of the NLS.

Over the past two years, however, the impact of sustained criticism by OFSTED of the design and implementation of the NLS has led to substantial modifications of the approach to teaching literacy promoted by the NLS, bringing it much closer to a ‘pure’ synthetic phonics approach. Rather unhelpfully, the DfES has presented this in a low-key way as interpretation and clarification rather than as a revision of the strategy, probably to save face.

The rest of this note explains the OFSTED criticisms and the resulting evolution in DfES recommendations.

### **THE NLS IN PRACTICE**

Good objective evaluation of the NLS has come from the work of OFSTED, which has regularly published papers commenting on the NLS on the basis of the findings from its programme of inspections of all state primary schools in England. The most recent and most comprehensive of these papers is ‘The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years’, published in 2002.

The OFSTED evaluation is fairly critical of the NLS and points out a number of weaknesses in its design and implementation, in particular:

- The ‘searchlights’ model of reading places too much emphasis on a broad range of decoding strategies and not enough on phonic decoding:  
*The ‘searchlights’ model proposed in the framework has not been effective enough in terms of illustrating where the intensity of the ‘searchlights’ should fall at the different stages of learning to read. While the full range of strategies is used by fluent readers, beginning readers need to learn how to decode effortlessly, using their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and the skills of blending sounds together. The importance of these crucial skills and knowledge has not been communicated clearly enough to teachers. The result has been an approach to word-level work which diffuses teaching at the earliest stages, rather than concentrating it on phonics (para 58).*

Furthermore, as a result of inadequate NLS guidance on phonics:

- Teachers are not teaching phonic knowledge and skills systematically and speedily from YR (*Main findings*)
- In guided reading, teachers are not placing enough emphasis on teaching word- and sentence level objectives, in particular the application of phonic knowledge and skills (*Main findings*)
- Teachers are failing to teach and revise phonics skills regularly through to Y4 (*Main findings*)

The OFSTED report had relatively little to say on spelling, but noted in the section on the evaluation of teaching quality that:

*Strengths of the good teaching included:*

- *Direct and effective teaching of phonics as a free-standing element*
- *Skilful guided writing with an appropriate focus on segmenting phonemes for spelling, leading to good development of pupils’ phonological knowledge to help them write independently (para 94)*

OFSTED also noted critically that the NLS has not been effective in bringing boys’ attainment up to the level of girls’ attainment.

In summary, while the report was generally supportive of the principle and much of the implementation of the NLS, it made clear that the NLS failed to promote adequate teaching of phonics and of the proper application of phonics as the primary strategy for both reading and spelling.

OFSTED also made clear that tackling these and other problems with the NLS required further development of the strategy (para 153). It also criticised the way the DfES has tackled emerging weaknesses by issuing extra guidance and materials instead of revising and improving the NLS itself. The OFSTED view is that this has made it difficult for schools to take an overview of all the elements and this has adversely affected the coherence of teaching.

#### **IMPROVING THE TEACHING AND APPLICATION OF PHONICS**

In response to this criticism, the DfES held a seminar on phonics in 2003. For this a DfES paper was produced clarifying the interpretation and application of the NLS: ‘Teaching phonics in the National Literacy Strategy’ (TPNLS – available at [http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/literacy/686807/nls\\_phonics0303nls.pdf](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/literacy/686807/nls_phonics0303nls.pdf) ). This paper is very important, because it made some very significant but under-reported changes to the NLS.

First of all (on page 3), it clarified the elements of the ‘searchlights’ model, defining them as:

- Fast automatic phonic decoding
- The recognition of words and word parts, particularly morphemic segments and boundaries *to make sense of and complete phonic blending*
- Predictions from knowledge of syntax *to make sense of strings of words, identify sense-making syntactic boundaries in sentences, and read with fluency and expression appropriate to the text*
- Predictions from context *to aid comprehension*

The qualifying clauses on the second, third and fourth strategies make clear that the second strategy is to be applied only *after* the words have been sounded and blended as far as possible, and the third and fourth strategies are not to be applied at word level at all, only at higher levels *after* the individual words have been read.

The DfES has therefore made clear that fast automatic phonic decoding is the *primary* searchlight for reading. Word and word-part recognition have a place only as a supplement to phoneme recognition and blending; predictive strategies have no place at all until after words have been read. Unfortunately, however, confusion about this continues, as is evident from statements made by Kevan Collins, Director of the Primary National Strategy, to the parliamentary Select Committee on 8 December 2004. Although he *did* say ‘the priority of information when you are young is developing the phonics knowledge’, he also implied that all four ‘searchlights’ strategies (*and* pictures) should be used from the start for word-identification. He did not seem to be conveying the same message as the TPNLS paper.

Following on from the points in the TPNLS paper which are mentioned above is a discussion of writing: the paper says, ‘the searchlights model is also applied inversely to the teaching of writing’ (page 4): in other words, the primary searchlight for writing is fast automatic phonic *encoding*, supplemented where necessary at word level by the use of known spellings of words and word parts.

Further clarifications of the recommended approach to teaching reading and spelling are scattered through TPNLS:

*At Key Stage 1, there should be strong and systematic emphasis on the teaching of phonics and other word level skills. Pupils should be taught to*

- *Discriminate between the separate sounds in words*
- *Learn the letters and letter combinations most commonly used to spell those sounds*
- *Read words by sounding and blending their separate parts*
- *Write words by combining the spelling patterns of their sounds (page 5)*

*Phonic knowledge and skills should be taught and practised to a level where decoding and spelling using phoneme-grapheme representations become habitual and operate at the level of tacit knowledge (page 5)*

*There is accumulating empirical evidence to show that, where phonics is taught systematically in Reception, children learn very quickly (page 9)*

*Children should be taught as quickly as possible to identify, segment and blend phonemes, and this should be taught to them directly, not left to inference or invention. (page 5)*

*Even those children who are competent in phonics at the end of Key Stage 1 need to continue to exercise their skills of segmentation.*

**TPNLS thus makes clear that the DfES has finally come round to recommending a phonics-driven approach to reading and spelling, and has moved away from the eclectic, multi-strategy approach which was previously favoured. But, as indicated above, this message does not come out clearly from Kevan Collins. There will not be clarity in the classroom while these mixed messages continue.**

One major recommendation included in the DfES paper is that schools should adopt an explicit phonics programme such as the DfES's own Progression in Phonics, or a commercial programme such as Jolly Phonics, POPAT or Phono-Graphix, as a means of securing more effective teaching and more rapid progression.

The DfES is also recommending the acceleration of phonics teaching, in line with the studies of Jolly Phonics and other programmes, which have shown that teaching around six sounds a week from the very beginning is much more effective than the pace previously recommended in the NLS.

As before, however, the DfES is trying to save face, and so has not made any changes to the main NLS to reflect what actually amounts to a very substantial change in the recommended approach to teaching literacy. Instead it is implementing change slowly by issuing more guidance to LEAs, more supplementary teaching materials, and by stating that it intends to develop a scheme for teaching spelling. Unfortunately this means that many schools will not even be aware of the changes, and will carry on using less effective approaches and inferior teaching materials.

There is also the accumulating body of evidence on the advantages of systematic (synthetic) phonics over 'eclectic' approaches from large-scale studies in South Gloucestershire, Clackmannanshire<sup>1</sup> and elsewhere, including:

- Significant increase in levels of attainment in reading and especially spelling
- Dramatic reduction in the incidence of dyslexia and specific learning difficulties, virtually eliminating the need for remedial help
- Equalisation of attainment of boys and girls

Much information and many links on these studies can be found on the websites of the Literacy Trust ([www.literacytrust.co.uk](http://www.literacytrust.co.uk)) and of the Reading Reform Foundation ([www.rrf.org.uk](http://www.rrf.org.uk)).

From this it does appear that there is an opportunity for even high-achieving schools to improve their pupils' performance.

This can also be done rapidly and with relatively little effort, since programmes such as Jolly Phonics are already fully developed with a comprehensive range of teaching and classroom materials and with a programme of conferences and training.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Executive Education Department is completely revising the literacy approach for Scottish primary schools to adopt the synthetic approach tested in the large scale Clackmannanshire study.

<sup>2</sup> The Early Years forum on the TES website also contains a great deal of useful advice on using Jolly Phonics, which seems to be the best developed and most widely used programme.

The following article about Fiona Nevola's 'Our Right to Read' project arrived just too late for inclusion in the last Newsletter, though we made brief mention of the project. We now include the article in full.

## THE SOUND READING SYSTEM

AND

*OUR RIGHT TO READ, OXFORD*

**Fiona Nevola**

The Foundation *Our Right to Read* now has Charitable status. The aim of the charity is to help children, who have struggled to learn to read, by providing the best individual tuition regardless of ability to pay.

The Sound Reading System has been adopted by the Charity *Our Right to Read* to advance literacy teaching and to establish a simple understanding of the English language code as the key to reading.

The Foundation have set out their aims and objectives:

- To advance literacy by the straightforward teaching of phonics in a straightforward, logical form to establish a simple understanding of the English language code as the key to reading.
- To offer children and young people the opportunity to learn to read which has been denied them.
- To establish *Reading Clinics* to teach reading on a remedial one-to-one basis.
- To encourage parents and carers to participate in the child's remedial learning process by attending the clinics and actively supporting the failsafe methodology between lessons.
- To provide grants for those who need financial help with the cost of tuition and training courses.
- To provide certified training courses in the teaching of The Sound Reading System
- To demonstrate, by example and advocacy, that *all* children (with the exception of those very few with profound learning difficulties) can, with effective tuition, learn to read.

This programme is based on the principles set out by Diane McGuinness in *Why Children Can't Read* (1997/8), the Prototype outlined in *Early Reading Instruction* (2004), and the spelling programme *Allographs* (1995). Diane McGuinness is a patron of *Our Right to Read*.

The essence of the Prototype (first published in the Newsletter 49, Autumn 2002) is that it spells out the exact nature and structure of the English alphabet code and precisely which elements need to be taught and which do not. *This makes it possible to achieve the maximum progress in the minimum amount of time.* Specific curriculum details have been worked out by the author in working with numerous pupils – all of whom have learned to read in 18 hours or less (one-to-one tuition with support). Every pupil has made gains of between 18 months and 4 years in their reading/spelling age within this time.

What does a child, from his point of view, need to know?

- I know that words are made up of individual sounds.
- I know there are about (only) 40-44 sounds in our language.
- When we write words we mark each sound by a letter or more than one letter.
- When we read we turn the letters back into sounds again to find the word.
- Our spelling system 'doesn't play fair', because there is more than one way to spell each sound.
- My teacher shows me how to find the spellings and we sort them and I write them.

e.g. the sound /ee/

m e                      t r ee                      t ea m                      s u n n y  
sh e                      g r ee n                      b ea n                      fu n n y

- I discover that sometimes a spelling has more than one sound, so we sort them as well, by listening for a real word.

e.g. the spelling ea

t ea m                      h ea d                      b r ea k

- I can read everything my teacher has taught me and
- I can learn to spell everything my teacher has taught me. It is fun to learn to read!

**Contact Fiona Nevola on +44-(0)1865 728760 or [fiona.nevola@virgin.net](mailto:fiona.nevola@virgin.net) for further information on the Trust, the teaching and the training.**

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### **'WHY STEVIE CAN'T SPELL'**

In an article in *The Washington Post* on 21 February, Steve Hendrix, a staff writer who has a wonderful way with words, writes honestly and humorously about his severe spelling problems: 'Being humiliated by my spell-check is pretty much a daily occurrence for me'. The advice to consult a dictionary 'whenever you are in the slightest doubt' is no help to him: 'Ah, the pitiless doctrine of Just Look It Up. It's hard to explain to my colleagues... that I am "in the slightest doubt" with about every 20th word I write, or that I'm sometimes too far at sea to even find it in the dictionary. (I once spent 20 minutes rewriting "mosquito" because I couldn't even get close enough for spell-check to take over.)'

He quotes Richard Gentry: 'We've been short-changing spelling for about the last 30 years... Most whole-language approaches ignore the individual phonemes that are the building blocks of words'. There are certainly indications in what Steve Hendrix tells us that he would have had fewer problems if he had started reading by sounding and blending at primary school. One of his spelling bugbears is the word 'itinerary', which he reports spelling in several different ways: iteniriary, itenirary, itinerrary, itenerry. Most phonics-taught children would sound this word out slowly and carefully when they first encounter it in reading and this would then help them to remember its spelling.

MRI scans carried out by Dr Sally Shaywitz confirmed that Hendrix was at the top of the ability-range in vocabulary and reasoning but that there was 'an unusual level of action on the right side of my brain, in the area where dyslexics tend to build new pathways to make up for misfires in their normal ones'. But are these 'misfires' there from birth, or are they result of 'dystachia'? This is an important question

**UPDATE FROM DR MARLYNNE GRANT**  
**(SUMMARY OF INFORMATION RECEIVED)**

The children who took the Key Stage 2 tests in 2004 at St Michael's School (Stoke Gifford) were the first to have had synthetic phonics right from the beginning of Reception. 94% achieved Level 4 or better in English (national figure 77%; statistical neighbours 80%), and, even more spectacularly, 65% achieved Level 5 (national figure 29%; statistical neighbours 28%). 'Statistical neighbours' are schools which are a close match in terms of size, numbers of children on free school meals etc. At St Michael's, the children's progress from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 was 13.7 National Curriculum points in both reading and writing, as against the national figure of 12.0 for each. This means that their good start enabled them to make even more progress from KS1 to KS2 than might have been expected.

A number of other schools are now also using *Sound Discovery*® as a Wave 3 intervention. One school reports a ratio gain of 3.8 for reading and 2.7 for spelling over a ten-week teaching period. The head-teachers commented that the programme was 'cheap and easy to introduce' and 'economical in terms of time'. Staff were 'highly motivated by its simplicity and the enjoyment expressed by the children. Quite simply, they were sold on the idea'. The head-teacher of another school commented that 'previously children in the class would have sat "looking at a word" and would have expected an adult to read it for them, but after *Sound Discovery*® all Mrs Williamson had to say was "remember the magic word – blending" and the pupils were reminded to sound out the word and say it for themselves'.

And the programme has been succeeding with much tougher customers. A team has been using *Sound Discovery*® with young offenders, who find the fine-grained small-step progression in Step 1 of the programme particularly motivating. One said it was 'the only thing which has ever made the slightest difference to my reading. The rest was \*\*\*\*\*'.

Marlynn Grant also draws attention to the OFSTED report *Reading for purpose and pleasure: An evaluation of the teaching of reading in primary schools* (December 2004), and points out that the case study on page 25 makes several references to Snappy Lesson® interventions as being part of successful interventions in years R, 1, 3 and 4. An HMI who inspected a Snappy Lesson® in November 2003 wrote a glowing report on it.

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**BOOK REVIEW**

***Conquer Dyslexia* by Felicity Craig. One-to-one publications, 2004. ISBN 0 9520937 1 5 pbk.**

Mrs Craig has worked in the field of teaching reading for many years, and her descriptions of the anguish of reading failure are accurate and telling. Her title is well chosen, especially when supplemented, as it is on the front cover, with the phrase 'without losing the gift' – I, too, think that many dyslexics have special gifts, for example in painting and engineering, and other writers who have called dyslexia a 'gift' have been James Evans (1983) and Ronald D. Davies (1994).

Another good feature of Mrs Craig's book is her encouragement to parents (and untrained people generally) to 'have a go': she does not build up a mystique to corner the field for 'experts'. She starts, rightly, from the belief that all children can learn to read, and she aims, again rightly, at having children read from the printed word alone

One feels, however, that she moves from observation to interpretation of children's thought-processes in a way which sometimes suggests a grown-up's conjectures about what is going on in the child's mind rather than what may actually be going on. An infant reading 'pin', then 'pig', is hardly operating a Venn diagram as she suggests. The workings of an infant brain are wonderful but not deliberate.

She seems to be one of those who can see words in her mind's eye. I cannot. She heartily supports phonics, along with shared reading and sight words. But Bonnie Macmillan has discredited a mix of methods. I am unable to see eye to eye with Mrs Craig in her support of, for instance, Huey, whom I see as the father of reading failure and Liz Waterland, whose *Read with me* echoes Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman. She is totally convinced by Glenn Doman's *Teach your baby to read*, and I am happy for children to learn to read as early as possible. But since Dr Doman has had plenty of publicity, why is reading failure still such a problem in America?

The book contains interesting, useful and even amusing advice for teaching maths.

This book would be useful for student teachers and others who are addressing their minds to what works in teaching reading. It will make them look hard at evidence around them and think, 'Is this right? Does this match what I see?'

As with all ways of teaching reading, we need test figures. East Lothian is using Mrs Craig's materials. What is the average reading quotient (or age) there after one school year? Two school years? An average reading age a good year above chronological age is now being achieved in various schools, with pupils then going from strength to strength until they 'hit the ceiling' of tests. What is Mrs Craig's average improvement ratio for strugglers? Is it at least 3 (a rise of 3 months of reading age in one calendar month)?

**Mona McNee**

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#### **NEW PAMPHLET BY TOM BURKARD**

Tom Burkard, Secretary of the Promethean Trust, has just produced a new pamphlet, 'After the Literacy Hour: May the Best Plan Win!' This has been published by the Centre for Policy Studies (tel. 020 7222 4488, fax 020 7222 4388, e-mail mail@cps.org.uk). Tom Burkard argues that the Literacy Hour has failed: since its inception, 1,188,200 children have failed to reach Level 4 in the Key Stage 2 tests. He shows that good synthetic phonics teaching differs from the Literacy Hour both in what it does and in what it does *not* do. Minette Marrin is quoted as having written, in the *Sunday Times* of 1 December 2002, of hearing privately that Tony Blair had 'sent a message to national numeracy and literacy advisors that they have only a year left to get their act together or he will scrap the literacy (and numeracy) strategy'. Burkard recommends that trials of synthetic phonics should now be conducted by 'independent organisations with a reputation for impartiality and academic rigour'. He suggests that 'Tony Blair has the chance to make our primary schools the first in the English-speaking world in terms of literacy'.