



In Memory of our good friend
Brian King who died in
December 2007

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

1	Editorial
2	Letters and Sounds review
9	The Estyn Report
12	Intervention
14	Don't be denied!
16	SP goes Spanish!
17	Carriacou and Petite Martinique
18	Reader's Letter
18	Brian King
20	Shahed Ahmed
21	Phil Beadle

Editorial

It is two years since the Reading Reform Foundation produced its last newsletter, a circumstance that could not possibly have been foreseen, and for which we apologise. As a consequence, this newsletter contains a mixture of articles which span this period. Some possibly look a little less cutting-edge than they might have done, had they appeared a year ago, but in reality, they remain well-written, full of insight, and relevant. (See the reviews of Letters and Sounds, the ESTYN report and ECAR).

Other, more recent articles have been commissioned, following television programmes which have had widespread impact on public consciousness with regard to the awful waste of human potential caused by the failure to be taught how to read. Phil Beadle and Shahed Ahmed were willing to share their thoughts with us on this.

There is much more to interest the reader, including Elizabeth Nonweiler's fascinating update on the reading project in Carriacou and Petit Martinique.

While much has been achieved in this intervening period, with regard to the rolling out of advice and programmes which promote the teaching of reading along sound and researched lines, there is still so much more to do. Gains have to be consolidated and defended. Thus the emergence of contradictory government intervention programmes gives cause for trepidation, and the intervening period has seen little advance on the accountability front.

We lost our dear friend and message board member Brian King in December 2007, to find he had left us a legacy with which to carry on campaigning. With Early Years still remaining an ideological battlefield, Brian's article is included to show its deep philosophical underpinnings.

The final report by Jim Rose on the curriculum will need looking at closely in the months to come, with, no doubt, plenty of food for thought. We can be certain that there will be no shortage of work for us all in the year that lies ahead.

So, we commend this newsletter to our readers. In future, articles of interest will appear more frequently and in an electronic format only, in order for us to respond more immediately to the big issues of the day. Watch this space!

Lesley Drake

March 2009

Letters and Sounds

Elizabeth Nonweiler

Letters and Sounds – *a Revolution in the Teaching of Reading*

Introduction

The Reading Reform Foundation has been asking for years for effective evidence-based teaching of reading to be promoted in schools. At last it has happened. All over England, many schools are using *Letters and Sounds*, a programme based on synthetic phonics teaching principles to teach children to read.

Letters and Sounds was produced by the government to replace *Progression in Phonics* (PIPs) and *Playing with Sounds*. Those programmes were not working well enough and Jim Rose, whose recommendations had been accepted by the government, said that what was needed was systematic synthetic phonics (Rose, 2006). The government published core criteria based on synthetic phonics to be met by all approved published phonics programmes. Next they produced *Letters and Sounds*, which conforms to these criteria.

It seems a bit odd at first. There are already several proven commercial synthetic phonics programmes that conform to the criteria. As far as I know, no-one who called for the use of synthetic phonics asked the government to write its own approved programme, financed by taxpayers and delivered free to every school. *Letters and Sounds* is not compulsory and can be ignored by schools that choose to use a commercial programme that conforms to the criteria; so it is not needed for those who are already convinced that synthetic phonics is best. The reason must be that the government was concerned that some local authority advisors and schools were likely to ignore Rose's recommendations, but with an official and free programme they would come on board. It looks as though that was right. Many local authorities and schools that were resisting change are now promoting *Letters and Sounds*.

Is *Letters and Sounds* effective? In other words, does it help teachers* to teach and children to learn to read?

First, a few samples from many positive comments* from practising teachers:

- I am so impressed with the progress that the September intake has made with Letters and Sounds.
- It has a good structure and is helpful in explaining various things.
- I can see a huge difference in my class's ability as a whole. PiPs didn't really follow anything... just random games and varying levels. L&S gives a proper scheme to follow.
- I'm very impressed with Letters and Sounds so far ... Both myself and my nursery nurse have noticed a significant improvement in children's reading as they are more confident 'sound-talking' unfamiliar words.
- The higher ability children are now well into Phase 5 and are reading well and writing independently ... The middle ability children have also made brilliant progress particularly with writing. They are very confident to have a go and I've noticed far less children coming to ask me how to spell a word ... It's definitely doing Letters and Sounds that has helped them ...
- It is hard work and there is a lot to fit in.... but I feel a lot happier with this than with PiPs, and so do the children.

And some questions and concerns:

- In the new Letters and Sounds document is there one single list of High Frequency Words? Do we still have to do 45?
- Help! My class are all on different phases of Letters and Sounds. Some are on Phase 2, some Phase 3, a handful on Phase 4 and two are ready for Phase 5. No idea how to organise them for my phonics lessons - how do I support the lower and challenge the bright ones?
- I find often children can blend and segment adjacent consonants but cannot remember vowel digraphs. So why have a separate Phase Four?
- The people who wrote it don't seem to understand how much time the 5 part lesson would take.
- There is too much to fit into a 20 minute session.

- On one hand we are told to let them play and our role is to scaffold, but at the same time we are being told to get them reading vowel digraphs during the first term in F2. Look at EYFS (*Early Years Foundation Stage*) and Letters and Sounds, they are clearly not out of the same stable ...
- Is phonics part of literacy or not? ... I don't understand the new framework.
- Just to clarify, 20 minutes Letters and Sounds a day and then 40 minutes CLL (*Communication Language and Literacy*) activity per day? It's all driving me a bit crazy, so much to fit in and a lot of pressure from others to do stuff in the EYFS.
- Is it acceptable to use Jolly Phonics activities, songs and actions alongside the L and S programme? Some people I know seem to think not....

So what do teachers need to teach phonics effectively?

Busy teachers, new to synthetic phonics, do not have time to read the detail carefully in everything thrown at them. Local Authority training is often inadequate. These teachers need:

- easy access to clear guidance
- to understand the principles of synthetic phonics
- to know how the alphabetic code works
- to know what to teach and how to move on
- to be able to organise classes and plan lessons to teach in this way

They also need to understand how phonics fits in with everything else they are asked to do.

Is the guidance in *Letters and Sounds* clear and easy to access?

There are plenty of statements that explain the theory and principles of synthetic phonics clearly. For instance:

In order to comprehend text ... children must first learn to recognise, that is to say, decode, the words on the page. (p. 6 *)

Phonic work should be regarded as an essential body of knowledge, skills and understanding that has to be learned largely through direct instruction, rather than as one of several methods of choice. (p.10)

There is helpful material to guide and support teachers, for example:

- a sequence of teaching in a discrete phonics session
- procedures for teaching new grapheme-phoneme correspondences
- routines for learning to read 'tricky words'
- banks of words and sentences
- assessment sheets
- tables of phonemes and graphemes

But are they easy to access?

The *Letters and Sounds* folder sent to every primary school includes a manual, *Six-phase Teaching Programme*, a shorter book, *Notes of Guidance*, a DVD and a poster with details of the core criteria. The manual is divided into the six 'phases' to show progression. *Notes of Guidance* explains important principles and provides an overview of the programme.

The trouble is that *Six-phase Teaching Programme* and *Notes of Guidance* have 236 pages between them. I have spoken to teachers who have found the documents quite overwhelming. My biggest problem in writing this review was finding what I was looking for. Although there is a contents page for each phase, there is no overall contents page or index in either book. As I investigated the questions and concerns of teachers and other professionals, I found again and again that when I looked for specific information I could not find it, but when I carefully read both books, the answer was there and well-explained.

Does *Letters and Sounds* help teachers to understand the principles of synthetic phonics?

Phases 2 to 6 of *Letters and Sounds* genuinely follow the principles of synthetic phonics as described in the Rose Review. They involve the key features of structured teaching of the alphabetic principle, including the reversible skills of blending sounds to read and segmenting words to spell. One of the most important principles of effective synthetic phonics teaching is the rejection of guessing strategies. The Rose Review expressed this clearly:

The knowledge, skills and understanding that constitute high quality phonic work should be taught as the prime approach in learning to decode ... (Rose, 2006, p. 70)

Letters and Sounds is also clear:

attention should be focused on decoding rather than on the use of unreliable strategies such as looking at the illustrations, rereading the sentence, saying the first sounds and guessing what might fit ... Children who routinely adopt alternative cues for reading unknown words, instead of learning to decode them, find themselves stranded when texts become more demanding and meanings less predictable. (p. 10)

There is an explanation in *Notes of Guidance* of the logical and fundamental 'Simple View of Reading' described in the Rose Review. This shows the two separate aspects of reading – word recognition and language comprehension – and that phonics is about word recognition. Phases 2 to 6 of *Letters and Sounds* are definitely about word recognition.

However, in Phase One the two are confused. Phase One comes before children begin structured phonics lessons and is said to be about 'providing a broad and rich language experience for children'. A broad and rich language experience is crucial to education in Foundation Stage and forever, but it is not part of word recognition as in the 'Simple View' until children can read texts easily. Phase One activities all involve listening carefully to sounds. They are fun for small children and great for helping them learn to concentrate, listen carefully and appreciate the world around them; but they have very little to do with learning to read words. Letters are not involved, although oral blending of sounds and segmenting of words is taught at the end of the phase. There is no evidence that I know of that listening to sounds without letters helps children learn to read words. It would make more sense in the early years to concentrate on developing language comprehension through speaking and listening. Then, when the teaching of reading skills begins, bring in letters and sounds together in a multi-sensory way, looking at letters, as well as listening to sounds in order to blend and segment orally. Luckily, it is stated clearly that children do not have to master all the skills in Phase One before beginning Phase Two. It would have been even clearer if *Letters and Sounds* did not include Phase One at all.

Does *Letters and Sounds* help teachers to know how the alphabetic code works?

We know that many teachers do not fully understand the alphabetic code. For example, they may not realise that there are about 44 sounds in English. A teacher who reads the materials carefully and teaches accordingly is bound to pick this up. However, it is easier to teach effectively and flexibly if your own understanding is secure from the start. Adults, like children, learn the code better with direct instruction, so it would have been a good idea to have had a short section written specifically to explain it to teachers.

High-frequency words and 'tricky' words are especially confusing for teachers who are familiar with the discredited *National Literacy Strategy* (NLS) and do not fully understand how the alphabetic code works. The NLS has lists of high-frequency words to be taught as 'sight recognition' words. *Letters and Sounds* has similar lists. The difference is that the words are not called 'sight recognition' words. Instead they are divided into decodable and 'tricky' words or 'words with unusual or untaught grapheme-phoneme correspondences'. There is good advice about how to practise the 'tricky' words and some clear and helpful explanations in *Notes of Guidance*. For instance,

What counts as 'decodable' depends on the grapheme-phoneme correspondences that have been taught up to any given point ... About half of the 100 words (*occurring most frequently in children's books*) are decodable by the end of Phase Four and the majority by the end of Phase Five.

Even the core of high frequency words which are not transparently decodable using known grapheme-phoneme correspondences usually contain at least one GPC (*grapheme-phoneme correspondence*) that is familiar ... it is advisable to start from what is known and register the 'tricky bit' in the word. Even the word 'yacht', often considered one of the most irregular of English words, has two of the three phonemes represented with regular graphemes. (p. 5)

However, teachers who are confused about the relationship between high-frequency and tricky words may remain confused. Why do we need a list of high-frequency words that includes words that are not 'tricky' and why do we need to plan to practise them? If they are high-frequency, they will naturally be used and practised frequently.

Does *Letters and Sounds* explain what to teach and how to move on?

One of the best things about *Letters and Sounds* is that it shows how to build on the initial teaching of reading in an organised, systematic and structured way. Phases 2 to 6 show what to teach and how to progress to the end of Key Stage 1. There is an overview of the phases in *Notes of Guidance*.

The biggest problem with the phases is that they appear inflexible. As with most criticisms of *Letters and Sounds*, there is a paragraph that counteracts this criticism:

Although the six-phase structure provides a useful map from which to plan children's progress, the boundaries between the phases should not be regarded as fixed ...some children will be capable of, and benefit from, learning at a faster pace ... whereas others may need more time and support ... (p. 4)

Nevertheless, my impression is that the phases have caused more worries for teachers than anything else in *Letters and Sounds*. They do not seem to allow for differentiation within them. It would be easy to go through them in a flexible way with individual children or with groups organised by ability, but with whole classes of children all learning at different rates it is much more difficult. Phase Four highlights this problem. At this stage, according to the teaching programme, children are to stop learning new GPCs and spend a few weeks practising reading and spelling words with adjacent consonants. What should a teacher do if some of the children in the class cannot yet blend simple CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words, some need to consolidate what has been taught so far and practise blending adjacent consonants, and others are ready for more of a challenge? Once again, I eventually found a relevant line in *Notes of Guidance*:

Many children may be capable of taking this step (*with adjacent consonants*) much earlier, in which case they should not be held back from doing so. (p. 11)

So, if you are a class teacher, how do you follow the structure of the phases and at the same time avoid holding these children back? Should you try to organise separate ability groups, each working within a different phase, with all the difficulties involved in planning and managing several groups? Without phases it would be possible, at least in the early stages, to teach whole class lessons with built-in differentiation. For instance, as soon as children know the graphemes, 'a', 'n', 't', they could have a go at 'ant', which has adjacent consonants. Probably a few would be able to read it independently, most with help, and a few would have no idea how to blend at all. The first group would be properly challenged, the second would benefit from hearing how it is done and repeating it, and the third group would get a little further with their understanding that the squiggles called letters represent sounds. Later, children who were falling a long way behind the majority of a class could be given a daily boost with an extra short lesson, revising the GPCs they had not remembered and practising the skills of blending, segmenting and forming letters. Teachers have always had problems with differentiation and how to manage it, and *Letters and Sounds* cannot be expected to solve them, but the concept of phases as understood by many teachers has added to the problems.

Alphabet names and graphemes with more than one letter are introduced in Phase 3. Some teachers say that children struggle with these graphemes. I have found that there is no problem if they are introduced simply, in just the same way as the single letter graphemes: "This is /t/", showing the letter 't', and, "This is /oa/", showing the letters 'oa'. *Letters and Sounds* states that letter names are needed to provide the vocabulary to describe these graphemes, but there is no need at this stage for children to describe graphemes.

Does *Letters and Sounds* help teachers to plan phonics lessons?

In each of Phases 2 to 5, the teaching programme gives this straightforward sequence for a lesson:

Introduction, Revisit and review, Teach, Practise, Apply, Assess learning against criteria.

'Teaching' involves new graphemes and tricky words, 'practise' involves reading and spelling words, 'apply' involves reading captions. So, the basics are covered.

The section for each phase also includes suggestions about what to do in each part of the sequence. Unfortunately, some of the suggestions are fussy and there are too many of them. For instance, for blending in Phase 3 there is a

game called, 'What's in the box?' The teacher has to get ready a set of word cards, a set of objects and a box. The children go through the reading procedure and then a 'toy character' or a child finds the corresponding object in the box. There are similar activities for other parts of the lesson. All these activities are too much to fit into the 20 minutes suggested in *Notes of Guidance*. Then, for the blending part of the lesson, there are two variations on the activity I described, two alternative activities and three further activities for small group work. This sort of detail fills between 22 and 35 pages for each phase. It is too much for teachers to read, take in, prepare and act on. If they skip it, they miss the important points that are interspersed with the detail.

The *Letters and Sounds* DVD is useful, as it shows excellent practice with real children, but it also shows sessions where there is too much talk instead of just getting on with the phonics.

Letters and Sounds could do with a template for a simple, short, inter-active, multi-sensory lesson. The essentials are learning GPCs, blending sounds to read, segmenting the spoken word to spell and forming letters. The same routine every day is fine. Children like routine. Teachers and children work more efficiently when they know what happens next without having to think about it or take time getting organised for something new. This is especially true for boys, and probably one of the reasons good synthetic phonics teaching works so well. That is not to say that the various time-consuming activities described are no good at all; they can help consolidate the phonics lesson at another time of day. The difficulty is that time is precious and there are other worthwhile things to do at school, such as art, music, listening to stories and so on.

There are no extra resources with *Letters and Sounds*. Schools may make them or buy them from commercial sources, but they must follow 'the sequence of the phonic content in a programme consistently from start to finish' (p. 8). This is difficult, because commercial resources, such as grapheme friezes for display, are made to match the sequence of the phonic content of other programmes.

How does *Letters and Sounds* fit in with everything else teachers are asked to do?

Teachers are expected to read, digest, plan, teach and report on the basis of a plethora of programmes, guidance and statutory requirements. There is the *Early Years Foundation Stage with Communication, Language and Literacy*; the *Renewed Literacy Framework* with twelve different strands; the *Early Literacy Support* programme; *Every Child a Reader with Reading Recovery*; the demands by advisors for guided reading, targets, more child-initiated learning, more structured teaching ... it goes on and on. *Letters and Sounds* is yet another one. The government may try to explain how they all go together, but it is not straightforward and some of it is blatantly contradictory. Teachers are understandably confused and frustrated by this.

Summary

Thanks to *Letters and Sounds*, many teachers are discovering for the first time that synthetic phonics works. Thousands of children are learning to read more easily than before, and fewer will suffer the misery of failing.

The principles of synthetic phonics are clearly expressed in *Letters and Sounds*. It provides a structure for progression and includes examples of good practice from some of the best commercial programmes with proven success. The DVD helps teachers to understand how to deliver crucial aspects with real children.

Nevertheless, *Letters and Sounds* has its flaws. One of the strengths of synthetic phonics is its simplicity, but *Letters and Sounds* appears complicated. There is too much for teachers to read and too many important points are lost in the detail. There is no specific section to explain the alphabetic code to teachers. The division into phases seems rigid and teachers are finding it difficult to organise lessons for children at different levels of understanding. Phase One is not about letters at all, only sounds.

The government is promoting the right method, but perhaps not in the best way. Teachers are professionals and tired of being told what to do. It might have been better if the money had been spent on providing schools with funds to buy into synthetic phonics training and choose their own resources. On the other hand, there are still too many intransigent and poorly-informed people with the power to dictate or influence decisions about teaching methods. Some of the same people are now training teachers in synthetic phonics, and their training is inevitably poor. Perhaps it was necessary to put synthetic phonics directly into schools via *Letters and Sounds*, to make sure that all children benefit as soon as possible.

Teachers are finding that the number of directives and initiatives passed down to them through a bureaucratic hierarchy is a nightmare, and *Letters and Sounds* adds to it. The government should make it a priority to untangle the muddle and throw out the detail.

Conclusion

If you are in a position to choose which phonics programme to use in your school, have a look at a few high quality synthetic phonics programmes, including *Letters and Sounds*, and make your own informed decision. There are several good programmes and they all have their strengths and weaknesses. The important thing is to teach children how to read and spell words using the alphabetic code. Keep it simple and enjoy the thrill of seeing children grow in confidence as they realise they can break the code and begin to read independently and accurately with no need for guessing.

Elizabeth Nonweiler

Notes

* Throughout this review, 'teachers' refers to anyone who teaches, including teaching assistants.

* Comments from practising teachers are either from the *Times Educational Supplement* message board or with permission from teachers I have met.

* Quotes are from *Notes of Guidance*, unless indicated otherwise.

References

authors not acknowledged (2007) *Letters and Sounds, Principles and Practice of High Quality Phonics* (DfES)

Rose, J. (2006) *Independent review of the teaching of early reading* (DfES)

Debbie Hepplewhite's comment:

I have very mixed feelings about the advent of Letters and Sounds. After a great deal of hard work to lobby government to look into how best to teach reading (and spelling), it is, however, nothing less than momentous (historic) to have achieved the House of Commons inquiry leading to the report Teaching Children to Read, followed by Jim Rose's national review of reading instruction leading to the Final Rose Report (2006), followed by the publication of Letters and Sounds providing official guidance for the Foundation Stage and Key Stage One.

Nothing in life is ever straightforward. The content of Letters and Sounds appears subject to diplomacy and compromises on all fronts. Although it clearly takes some of its practice from some of the leading synthetic phonics programmes (and also from previous government publications), it nevertheless creates, in effect, yet another programme which has not been properly trialled - either to compare it with leading programmes or to 'iron out' aspects which may not be practical in teaching terms - such as the notion of 'phases' as Elizabeth has mentioned above. Teachers describe to me how they have many phonics groups in their classes according to the 'phases' and it is hard work to plan and provide for them. My understanding, however, is that the 'phases' were intended to refer to stages of teaching rather than intended to lead to multiple ability groups.

Yet again we are instructed with government guidance where we are not told the names of the authors - something which I have criticised heavily in the past as this leaves one unable to properly question and debate the details - official guidance presents as 'faceless' and 'authoritarian'. This does nothing to improve our teaching climate and sense of professionalism. I believe that anonymous government publications are unacceptable as anonymity is surely less than transparent.

Although Elizabeth has reported that there is good quality teaching demonstrated on the Letters and Sounds DVD, I myself saw some aspects of blending longer words which I thought was not at all representative of good synthetic phonics practice where a covered-over 'fourth' letter was predicted by children before this last letter was 'revealed' - for example, the word 'ten' transforms into the word 'tent' after the children have predicted what the final letter might be. This is a totally unnecessary step and does not resemble at all the straightforward process of simply sounding out and blending all the graphemes all-through-the-word. The over-emphasis in 'phase 2', for example, of working only with three- letters, three-sounds words at first leads to teachers being restricted by this advice. Leading programmes such as the original Clackmannanshire programme, Jolly Phonics and Read Write Inc., which have all been fully trialled, introduced longer words amongst the shorter words at the beginning of their programmes - thus their cumulative word banks were not restricted as they are in Letters and Sounds.

We are hearing reports of local authority advisors instructing schools to 'use Letters and Sounds' whereas we are told that this was not the government's intent. Schools should consistently be advised that they can evaluate and select their own systematic programmes - whether commercial or in-house - as long as they fit with the government's criteria for selecting a reading instruction programme. It seems that advisors and some headteachers are failing to lead the way regarding the need to carefully and independently evaluate the synthetic phonics programmes and undue pressure is being brought to bear in some quarters to 'do Letters and Sounds' leaving teachers feeling less than free to make professional choices.

The ultimate irony and, arguably, tragedy is that the government is failing to apply its own criteria regarding selecting a reading programme for intervention purposes. Jim Rose makes it clear in his report (Rose Report 2006) that Wave 2 and Wave 3 intervention programmes need to fit in with the mainstream programmes. How can it be, then, that Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, continues to promote the whole language Reading Recovery programme under the 'Every Child a Reader' umbrella which, far from being in line with mainstream synthetic phonics teaching, is closer to the 'Searchlights Reading Strategies' model which was rejected by Rose and replaced by 'The Simple View of Reading' model? Recent government correspondence, however, includes the suggestion that Reading Recovery is in line with 'The Simple View of Reading' whilst admitting it is not in line with the Rose recommendations! How can Reading Recovery be simultaneously not in line with Rose who puts forward 'The Simple View of Reading' and also be in line with 'The Simple View of Reading'? A sample of my correspondence with government ministers and representatives related to this issue is posted on the UK Reading Reform Foundation message forum at www.rrf.org.uk. The Reading Reform Foundation, and others, argue strongly that we need synthetic phonics intervention and not whole language intervention. In fact, what do we even mean by 'intervention'? I would suggest that we simply need to identify properly what each pupil does not know in terms of alphabetic code knowledge and skills - and then teach these well accordingly - as opposed to giving pupils contradictory multi-cueing reading strategies which research has already shown us to be a flawed approach (and which has Rose rejected).

Further, (and shockingly) we have evidence that the National Strategies team has sent guidance through official literature to local authorities and headteachers describing how Reading Recovery should influence 'Quality First' teaching which is surely a total reversal of the message of Jim Rose's independent national inquiry! Rose's conclusions were supposedly accepted in full by the government - hence the advent of Letters and Sounds - and yet Ed Balls and the government's further action regarding the weakest children remains unaccountable in terms of objective research, classroom findings - and it's opposite message to the Rose Report. The government, in effect, is undermining its own guidance included in its own publication, Letters and Sounds!

As an ordinary British citizen, I am left perplexed as to how we can ever hold government to account for its many garbled messages to the teaching profession.

The Estyn Report

Jennifer Chew

June 2007 saw the publication of a report by the Welsh Inspectorate, Estyn, on 'Improving the learning and teaching of early reading skills'.

There are some good things in this report, for example the following (paragraph numbers are given in brackets):

- ... pupils must learn the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences ... in a clearly defined sequence. (24)
- ...specific links between reading and spelling are productive in developing familiarity with letters, the composition of words and their sounds...(38)
- Research has shown that learning letter-sounds alone is not sufficient. Pupils also need to know how to apply their letter-sound knowledge. Therefore, from an early stage, pupils need to learn about blending the sounds for reading... Generally, there is benefit to pupils when they are able to blend sounds quickly from an early stage, because this skill helps them to tackle unfamiliar words (71)

- In the most effective practice, staff link work on phonics with work on developing writing and spelling skills. Critically, there is a keen emphasis on the reversibility of skills, for example, learning to blend phonemes for reading and segment phonemes for spelling. (75)

This is all well in line with key points in the Rose Review and with the government's new advice on the teaching of early literacy in England. Nevertheless, I found the Estyn report more disappointing than encouraging.

Decoding and comprehension

The Estyn authors seem either to have rejected the 'simple view' of reading or else not to have understood it adequately. The 'simple view', as originally put forward by Gough and Tunmer in 1986, is that we need to distinguish between two dimensions of reading: 'decoding' and 'comprehension', where 'comprehension' is not specific to reading but involves spoken language, too. The implication for early reading is that the major emphasis at first needs to be on teaching decoding, as most children arrive at school with enough general language comprehension to be getting on with. The Rose Review accepted this view, and the new government guidance for schools in England is based on it. This guidance supersedes the earlier 'searchlights' model, which did not distinguish between decoding and comprehension but in fact confounded them.

The Estyn report, however, seems to want to continue treating decoding and comprehension as an indivisible whole from the start. When decoding is mentioned, it is immediately said to be not enough. For example:

- Research and inspection evidence endorses [sic] phonics as an important skill in learning to read. However, this evidence recognises that, by itself, phonics is not the only skill that pupils need in order to read successfully. Besides engaging in the mechanics of decoding words, readers also need to be able to make sense of what they read. Gaining phonic skills is one of a range of strategies that pupils need to help them read. (22)

- The findings of the review of literature justify the teaching of phonics as an important skill in learning to read. However, the review and inspection evidence recognise that by itself, phonics is not the only skill necessary for reading. This is because being able to decode the words alone is not enough: readers also need to be able to make sense of what they read. Pupils should use phonics as one of the strategies they need to help them read. Learning phonics should be part of a balanced language and literacy programme that also includes word recognition and comprehension. (57)

Of course we all agree that children need to understand what they decode as well as to decode it. But when comprehension is stressed as above, the implication is that it seldom or never automatically accompanies decoding, whereas it very frequently does automatically accompany decoding, at least when texts are conceptually simple. In other words, phonics is enough when texts convey only ideas which children would instantly understand if they heard them in spoken form: decoding enables the children to convert the written words into spoken words and they then understand them just as they would have done if someone else had read them aloud in the first place. And texts should be conceptually simple in the early stages: at this point, it is enough for children to be working hard at decoding without also having to work hard at comprehending. If teachers want to foster the comprehension of more complex texts before children are competent at decoding, they should do it by reading aloud to the children, thus doing the decoding fluently for them and allowing them to devote their full attention to understanding the concepts. Those of us who put the main emphasis on decoding in the early stages do not ignore comprehension – we just know that it can usually be taken for granted provided that we expect children to decode only words and sentences that they would easily understand if they heard them spoken aloud.

Phonemic awareness

Another problem with the Estyn report is its stance on phonemic awareness. Appendix 1, which outlines the thinking behind the report's conclusions, states that 'Phonemic awareness is a prerequisite to the development of the alphabetic principle – that units of sound map on to units of print – essential for children's progress in becoming skilled readers (Share, 1995)'. This, however, gives a misleading impression of what is said by David Share in the excellent article in question ('Phonological recoding and self-teaching: Sine qua non of reading acquisition', *Cognition* 55). He

certainly says that understanding the alphabetic principle is essential if children are to become skilled readers, but he does not say that phonemic awareness is a prerequisite to the development of the alphabetic principle. What he says, in carefully chosen words, is as follows (all italics are original):

'...we can conclude that phonemic awareness (in conjunction with letter-sound knowledge) is a causal co-requisite for successful reading acquisition.... Phonemic awareness is not a precondition in the sense of being necessary prior to learning to read, provided the learner is either taught or able to induce awareness in the course of reading instruction' (p. 192); 'Together, the data from both illiterate and preliterate samples indicate that most children develop an awareness of phonemes as they learn to read' (p. 195).

Share is clearly saying that phonemic awareness does not have to be in place before children start learning letter-sound correspondences. Rather, he says that what is important is the combination of knowing these correspondences and knowing how to use them in reading by blending phonemes: 'the combination of phoneme synthesis and letter-sound knowledge, are co-requisite, causal factors in reading acquisition' (p. 193). In keeping with this, a number of very successful phonics programmes launch straight into teaching letter-sound correspondences, together with blending for reading (and segmenting for spelling), without giving children any prior training in phonemic awareness.

Evidence of carelessness?

The reference to Share may be a matter of careless expression rather than of genuine misunderstanding. There are other signs of carelessness in Appendix 1, however: the punctuation is poor at times; several of the studies cited in the text are not listed in the References – for example, Anthony and Lonigan (2004), Geudens et al. (2004), Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000), and Wyse (2000); the Clackmannanshire children are said to have been 'three years six months ahead of chronological age' in spelling by the end of primary school, whereas this was the figure for word-reading – in spelling they were 20 months ahead of chronological age; and a 2001 meta-analysis by Ehri et al., published in *Reading Research Quarterly*, is said to have 'found that synthetic phonics and larger-unit systematic phonics programs produced a similar advantage' – but I could find no such conclusion in the paper in question.

There is also a misleading reference to something written by me in the editorial to RRF Newsletter 55, 2005. The Estyn Appendix authors write of 'the emergence of the Reading Reform Foundation as a campaigning group advocating "synthetic phonics first, fast and only" (Chew, 2005)'. The phrase I actually used was 'phonics fast, first and only' (no 'synthetic'), and this was a direct quotation from the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee's report *Teaching Children to Read*, published a month or two before the Newsletter in question came out. I carefully avoided 'advocating' phonics fast, first and only in that editorial, thinking it more important to support the Committee's recommendation that the effectiveness of this approach should be thoroughly investigated by the Department for Education and Skills (as it then was). The Committee had written 'We therefore strongly urge the DfES to commission a large-scale comparative study' to establish, among other things, 'the effect of mixing phonics instruction with other methods of teaching, compared to "phonics fast, first and only"' (*Teaching Children to Read*, p. 36). My 2005 editorial advocated support for this recommendation – it did not jump the gun by assuming that the outcome would be in favour of synthetic phonics.

Phonics and 'balance'

Appendix 1 of the Estyn Report poses 'a number of questions of fundamental importance for teachers' and summarises some of the research relevant to each of these. Its conclusion is that 'The research evidence is sometimes contradictory and often limited', but that 'Nonetheless, there is sufficient consensus for us to be able to suggest tentative answers to the questions, which frame this review of the literature'. I shall comment just on the answer to the question of the 'Relative importance of phonics in the teaching of reading'. This answer is that

'While research findings leave little doubt as to the usefulness of systematic phonics instruction, there is also broad agreement that this approach is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the teaching of reading. The weight of opinion favours a balanced approach, incorporating both constructivist strategies and direct instruction, over either whole language or phonics approaches used in isolation,' (italics original).

This fails, however, to do justice to the Appendix authors' own summary of the relevant research, which, in addition to stressing the need for balance, also states that 'The consensus view (NRP, 2000; Ehri et al., 2001; Westwood, 2003) would seem to be that phonics approaches are of greatest value in the early stages of teaching' and quotes a 2004 study by Rasinski and Padak as follows:

'While it may be appealing to think that 30 minutes devoted to word decoding and phonics balances against an equal amount of time devoted to guided reading, this may not produce the optimum results that are hoped for. In sixth grade, for example, it may be better to give additional weighting to guided reading and less weighting to decoding and phonics, so that perhaps 50 minutes per day is given to guided reading while 10 minutes is spent focused on decoding or phonics.'

It is misguided to stress 'balance' without also stressing that the balance in the early stages of instruction may need to be different from the balance thereafter. The Rose Review recognises much more clearly than the Estyn report that the balance shifts over time, with the major emphasis in the early stages needing to be on decoding. If decoding is well taught at the start, the need to spend even ten minutes a day on, 'decoding and phonics' should have disappeared long before 'sixth grade'. This is the seventh year of school for American children, and is the grade in which most of them turn twelve – with good teaching, they should have learnt to decode in the first two or three years of school. Indeed, much of the point of putting the major stress on decoding at first is to establish this skill as quickly as possible so that it becomes automatic and children are free to concentrate fully on comprehension from then on.

'Look and say', even in Welsh

A final snippet: paragraph 77 of the Estyn report starts as follows:

'Inspection evidence shows that the attention that schools give to learning phonics in the teaching of Welsh as a second language is variable. Often, there is a greater focus on other reading strategies. In particular, there is usually a strong emphasis on the "look and say" approach to reading where pupils learn to recognise words and phrases. This is surprising since Welsh is a phonically regular language.'

The fact that the whole-word approach is used even in a language whose grapheme-phoneme correspondences are much simpler than those of English would seem to illustrate the unwarranted influence which this type of approach has had.

Conclusion

It seems likely that early reading will be taught rather differently in Wales from the way it is taught in England from now on, if it is based on the Estyn report in one case and on the Rose Review in the other. It will be interesting to see whether this results in differences in standards.

Intervention

A Review of 'Every Child a Reader: the results of the second year'

Maggie Downie

Another year has passed and we have another report about Reading Recovery under the umbrella of *Every Child a Reader* (2007). It is a well-produced work, full of heart-warming success stories and grateful testimonials from children, parents, teachers and headteachers. It is a report designed to convince the doubters and to assure their backers that all is well with the world and that Reading Recovery alone has the key to teaching children to read.

It is notable that some emphasis is put on hitting the right buttons in response to criticisms that Reading Recovery does not conform to the findings of the Rose Review (2006) or the government guidance for the initial teaching of reading (DCSF 2006), as embodied in Letters and Sounds (DCSF 2007). For example, apparently Reading Recovery teachers attended a series of government-funded conferences to 'update them on current national policy on the

teaching of early reading – with a particular focus on the Rose Review and systematic phonics teaching’ (Every Child A Reader Newsletter 5, 2007). Many of the case studies have references to ‘segmenting’ and ‘blending’ and ‘learning sounds’. But if you dig a little deeper, there are disturbing clues that the message put out by the conferences and the national guidance on teaching reading may not be reaching its target.

The phonic work still does not seem to be systematic or the alphabetic code understood. Shannon [p. 9] is ‘taught the “ee” sound’ when she encounters the word ‘weed’. She reads it first as ‘plants’, having looked at the picture. (Who taught her to look at pictures to attempt to find out what a word ‘says’?) Well, no, she is not ‘taught the “ee” sound’; she is taught that the grapheme ‘ee’ can represent the /ee/ sound *in this particular word*. We can only hope that her Reading Recovery teacher actually has a better grasp of phonic principles than the person who wrote the case study. This is incidental phonics teaching rather than the systematic phonic instruction advocated by Jim Rose. Later in the lesson she does some work on the letters ‘q’, ‘sh’, ‘y’, and ‘a’ to help her remember the letter names and sounds. I am puzzled as to how she managed to read ‘several familiar books’ at the start of the lesson without knowing at least ‘a’. Was it a struggle for her? But wait, she must know ‘a’ because she managed to read the word ‘can’. Well, she read it as ‘can’t’ first, which hints at guessing rather than reading, but Shannon is a bright girl; she quickly ‘self-corrected’.

‘q’ is an odd letter to teach in isolation. It is never written without an accompanying ‘u’ in English words. Although I personally think that it is wise that children are taught that ‘q’ represents a /k/ sound, as the ‘q’ and ‘u’ together do not invariably spell /kw/ (antique, unique), it is also useful to teach the ‘u’ as /w/ at the same time as ‘q’ so that the child can decode the two letters correctly when they encounter them. How is Shannon going to decode ‘quick’ when she encounters it. /k/ /u/ /i/ /k/ perhaps? Well, she doesn’t have to sort it out herself because in the new book about ducks, the teacher has the word ‘quack’ to use to illustrate the ‘q’ sound that Shannon has just been taught. In other words, she is told the whole word. Except that the teacher does not seem to be mentioning the /w/ that goes with it. Who does not appear to know what they are doing here – the teacher or the author of the case study?

In the writing section of the lesson, Shannon makes up her own sentence to write. I cannot help wondering what is systematic about this part of the lesson. Why is the teacher not giving Shannon some practice in using the graphemes she has just been learning by giving her a dictated sentence, as any systematic phonics teacher would do? When will Shannon get a chance to use her new grapheme knowledge in writing? Luckily her sentence contains a correspondence, ‘ee’, that was encountered in the initial reading section, so the teacher can seize on this for another bit of incidental phonics instruction. It also contains the word ‘beautiful’. How does the teacher incorporate that into the phonics instruction? We are not told. Elkonin boxes (ready-drawn squares) are used in writing words. This is a good practice for making explicit the connection between spoken sound and written grapheme with a grapheme written in each box. Unfortunately Reading Recovery does not use them this way. The accompanying picture shows Shannon proudly displaying the word she has written in the boxes. It is ‘watched’, a four phoneme word (w a tch ed). Poor Shannon has seven boxes, one letter in each box. What has she learned? Has she learned that ‘watched’ has seven letters in it? This does not resemble a synthetic phonics approach where letter groups (graphemes) are taught as code for the phonemes according to the government’s own guidance in Letters and Sounds.

Analysing one account of a lesson seems hardly fair, but everything that is wrong about that lesson, as far as it relates to systematic phonics instruction, can be seen in any encounter with a Reading Recovery lesson. This is true, whether as described by Marie Clay (2005) in what we are informed is a key Reading Recovery text, or as seen on Teachers TV (2006), which has two very interesting short films of Reading Recovery in action, or from reports of observations of Reading Recovery sessions. All show that nothing has really changed post Rose.

Given the unsystematic and muddled phonics teaching exemplified in this lesson, I do think that what Reading Recovery achieves with these children is truly miraculous. Who can fail to be struck by the very impressive difference in complexity between the Level 1 and Level 15 texts presented on pages 12 and 13? From non-reading to (on my count) 45 phoneme/grapheme correspondences in some quite complex words, with apparently the ‘hardest to teach’ children (Cracker, 2006), in the course of twenty weeks, is amazing. When I think of how it can take weeks of patient daily work to teach some children to blend a CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) word, then Reading Recovery’s gains seem almost too good to be true. As it cannot be the phonic work (else those slow blenders would be flying, just as the Reading Recovery children are doing), it must be the carefully targeted words of praise and encouragement that Reading Recovery teachers have taken a whole year to learn to use to greatest effect (as I am informed by an experienced ex- Reading Recovery Teacher). Of course they would not be teaching children to ‘predict’ from initial letters, pictures and context any more, would they? These are all part of the ‘searchlights’ reading model, which was deemed by Rose and his team to be (at the very least) unhelpful in the initial teaching of reading (Rose, 2006, Appendix 1) and so was swept away. I am sure that an intervention, which claims to be able to teach the children who find it hardest to learn to read, would not be using strategies which proved to be so ineffective that they are no longer recommended.

Of course, it could just be possible that many of these children would have improved anyway with some good systematic phonics-based classroom teaching, unmixed with the methods promoted by the old National Literacy Strategy. It is noticeable that, in the four examples cited of schools which use Reading Recovery, not one appears to be using systematic phonics instruction as their sole method of initial instruction.

Benson Primary School [p. 23] has 'A Reception Literacy Programme' focusing on phonics, key words and reading lots of 'very simple books'. (Is this the Reading Recovery offshoot as used by another of the cited schools?) It has the 'phonics' buzzword, but the 'focus on key words' sounds suspicious and the 'very simple books' do not sound very promising either. A school which has a firm phonics base would be using decodable books. In addition, they use Fischer Family Trust as their 'Wave 3' programme, a programme which is very much mixed methods. And their 'Y2 Intensive Reading Programme' is based on Reading Recovery levelled books, which have complex, repetitive texts with lots of picture clues.

Lauriston Primary School [p. 24] claims to use Ruth Miskin's programme, but is it a Ruth Miskin trained school? Any Ruth Miskin school which was wholeheartedly committed to the programme would be using ability grouping and rigorous phonics instruction for all their children. The fact that the school has had Reading Recovery since 1993, and has two Reading Recovery trained teachers, seems a strong indication of an adherence to mixed methods. After all, Reading Recovery UK has only experienced its apparent conversion to 'systematic phonics instruction' since the publication of the Rose Review and the expression of doubt over its ability to conform to the requirements of this report.

Let us look at the intervention programmes used by Lister Infant School [p. 25]. It uses Early Literacy Support, a programme much criticised for its mixed methods approach, which has only recently been withdrawn and replaced with a programme which, we are assured, now conforms to the requirements of the Rose Review. It also uses Better Reading Partnerships, an offshoot of Reading Recovery. This is a description of Reading Friends, part of Better Reading Partnerships (Dunford, 2000):

Reading Friends meet their pupil once or twice a week for half an hour supervised by a trained support worker. They use the same strategies. The reading partner notes the child's use of the three BRP reading strategies: grapho-phonetic (visual), syntactic (structure) and semantic (meaning). Weaknesses are addressed through prompts: "Does that look right?", "Does that sound right?", and "Does that make sense?".

The Head Teacher of the Guardian Angels Primary School [p. 26] was trained as a Reading Recovery teacher eight years ago. Despite the claim that 'phonics is taught systematically and thoroughly through Jolly Phonics', mixed methods interventions are used. These are the Reception Literacy Programme, another Reading Recovery offshoot, and the mixed methods Early Literacy Support programme.

And again, Shirley Manor Primary [p. 27] uses the same interventions: Early Literacy Support and Better Reading Partnerships.

These are all schools which use mixed methods. No school teaching reading through rigorous, well-understood, systematic phonics instruction would entertain Reading Recovery, with its mix of methods and levelled books, for their struggling readers.

I commented on the first Every Child a Reader report in 2007 (Downie, 2007). My comments still stand as I can find nothing in the second report to indicate that they have really changed in the light of the requirements of the new national guidelines for the teaching of reading. Reading Recovery is still using unsystematic and muddled phonics instruction. Reading Recovery teachers are still using confusing and damaging strategies, such as teaching struggling readers letter names, teaching spelling as letter strings and encouraging children to use picture clues and 'words within words' as word attack strategies. I am still disturbed by the fact that they can offer no evidence of comparisons with similar children taught with rigorous systematic phonics and given the same amount of individual one-to-one teaching. I am still extremely disturbed that the DCSF sanctioned the use of this programme before the new guidelines were in place, without apparent regard to the fundamentally different pedagogy on which it is based, a pedagogy which is strikingly similar to the old NLS reading strategies. I am horrified that it was rolled out nationally in September 2008, with financial and political pressure exerted on schools to put the programme in place, before the new guidelines had time to take effect.

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Don't be denied!

Yvonne Meyer

I'm just a stay-at-home mum with no formal qualifications in education so at the end of my son's first year of formal schooling, when I told his teacher that I thought he had a problem and she said he was fine, I believed her.

During my son's second year at school, I told his teacher that I thought he had a problem because he couldn't sound out any words and the teacher told me that she had no concerns about my son's progress because of all the reading I was doing at home with him. I didn't understand why the fact that I could read meant that my son didn't have a problem, but accepted that the teacher knew more about education than I did.

The teacher was very kind and caring and realising how concerned I was, arranged for my son to have daily one-on-one remedial reading lessons with the Reading Recovery teacher. I was so grateful and relieved.

My son's Reading Recovery teacher would write down a simple sentence and read it to my son. Then she would cut the paper so that the sentence was in two or three pieces and my son would place them in the correct order. They would read the sentence together while clapping their hands. He would be given the bits of paper to take home and his homework would be to glue the sentence back together in the right order. Over time, the sentence got longer and the bits of paper got smaller, sometimes individual words were even cut in half and had to be glued back together in the right order.

The week after he 'graduated' from Reading Recovery, he was tested three times by three different teachers using Reading Recovery levels. He scored Level 9 with one teacher, Level 17 with another teacher and Level 30 with a third teacher.

None of the teachers would discuss these results with me, but they were all very keen to ask me questions about our home life. I was told that the problem was that I should have held him back from starting school, that I doted on my son, that I only had one child, that I had too much time on my hands, and that I shouldn't push him, but let him be happy.

A teacher suggested that he might have a 'Learning Difficulty'. Over the next couple of years, I took him to every specialist I could find in this area and my son was diagnosed as having every 'Learning Difficulty' ever identified. I was told he had dyslexia and dyspraxia, problems with visual processing, auditory processing, fine motor skills and short term memory. I was told that he was Gifted and had habituated inattention and learned helplessness. I was told it was my fault because I spent too much time with him and did too much for him. I was told I had to do daily exercises with him and I had to help him with his schoolwork. I was told to take a screen into his classroom and when it was time for him to do his written work, I should place the screen around him to filter out distractions. I was told he needed intellectual challenge and I should cut him loose to sink or swim so that he would learn independence.

I did everything the teachers, remedial specialists and education consultants told me to do, including changing schools and attending marriage counselling.

Over this long and difficult period, when I was trying hard to help my son by following the advice of the highly trained educational experts responsible for his education, there were things I became aware of which struck me as odd.

While many of the children in his year level were two years older than he was and towered over him, he had lots of friends and got on well with everyone. So how could his problems be due to my decision to enrol him in school at the age determined by our government to be appropriate?

When his teacher complained that he did not finish the daily task of copying down work that had been written on the whiteboard, I noticed that in order to see the whiteboard, he had to get up from his desk, walk around a bookcase, duck under a mobile, step over children kneeling on the floor, read the board and then reverse the process to get back to his desk, often to find that someone had walked off with his pencil, or spilt a drink over his exercise book.

His Occupational Therapist pointed out that he held his pencil in the 'claw' grip common to left-handed children and that he wrote his letters mirror-fashion, i.e. upside down and back to front. She showed him how to hold a pencil correctly and to turn his chair and his exercise book to the correct angle, and taught him how to write each letter of the Alphabet correctly, and I noticed an expedient improvement in his handwriting.

One of the many tests my son undertook with a specialist in Learning Difficulties was described to me a test of "the 44 phonemes". He scored zero on this test, which upset the specialist so much she interrupted the test to ask me how he could read. I said I didn't know, but I didn't tell her that I didn't know what a phoneme was, or what it had to do with reading. I took the results of this testing back to my son's school and made a special point of mention the zero score on the test of 44 phonemes because it seemed so important to the specialist.

By now I was aware that being left-handed had educational implications so I went onto the Internet to search for a shop that sold left-handed school supplies. Searching under, "left-handed", I happened to see that in the UK Parliament, there had been a failed attempt to pass a Bill that would make it mandatory for teachers to give specific handwriting instruction to left-handed students. While reading this, I realized that none of my son's teachers had given any handwriting instruction, left or right.

I was helping my son with his spelling homework and getting more and more frustrated with his passive hostility. He would just sit there and stare at the page and would not write down a letter unless I told him which letter to write. Finally, I lost my temper and started yelling that as the first letter of the word was a consonant, the second letter was probably a vowel and as there were only five vowels to choose from, instead of just sitting there like a potato, he could try writing one of them down (expletives deleted). When I stopped ranting, he looked up at me with tears in his eyes and said, "Mummy, what's a vowel?"

He was nine years old and was in his fourth year of formal schooling, attending the best school money could buy, and he'd had two terms of one-on-one intervention with a trained Reading Recovery teacher. Yet he could not recite the Alphabet, did not know a single sound/letter correspondence, let alone a noun from a verb, or the difference between a full stop and a comma.

Every single school report he had ever received stated he was an average student and progressing well.

I used the Internet to search for more information and finally found out what a phoneme was and its relevance. I was able to determine that he required direct, explicit, intensive and systematic instruction in synthetic phonics and that the Spalding program would provide this. I made contact with a retired school teacher who had been trained to teach phonics when she had undertaken her initial teacher training many years earlier, and had been a Spalding teacher for more than a decade before her retirement. Instead of filling her retirement days with leisurely games of golf, she was flat-out tutoring children like mine who were struggling to read and write because they had not been taught properly.

My son learnt the 75 Spalding “phonograms” in twelve hours of one-on-one instruction, and after three months of weekly lessons in blending and segmenting, his spelling had improved three Grade levels. He made more progress in three months with his Spalding tutor than he had done in four years of formal schooling.

Even more interesting was the way all his ‘Learning Difficulties’ disappeared once he no longer had to read by memorising text and guessing meaning from context, and started reading by sounding out words – decoding/recoding.

The point I would like to make is that parents assume that a properly qualified and registered teacher working at an appropriately licensed school knows how to teach a child to read. A parent is in no position to evaluate the teacher’s pedagogy to ensure it is effective, or to review the school’s Curriculum which has been determined by the official Department of Education. A parent is in no position to correctly interpret that Edubabble terms like ‘child-centred’ and ‘developmentally appropriate’ do not mean that the teachers are kind to the children and teach them according to their abilities, but are nonsense based on the failed philosophy of Whole Language/constructivism.

SP goes Spanish!

Inés Delgado-Echagüe Sell
Teacher and teacher trainer

I am a Teacher who has been teaching through English for the past fifteen years. Most of my experience has been with children aged 3, 4, 5 and 6 years, their mother tongue being mainly Spanish. The type of teaching I do is based on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and this approach has proven very clearly to me that it is much more effective than traditional language teaching.

CLIL has become the term describing both learning another (content) subject such as Knowledge and Understanding of the World through the medium of a foreign language and learning a foreign language by studying a content-based subject. In ELT, forms of CLIL have previously been known as “Content based instruction”, “English across the curriculum” and “Bilingual education”. To put it simply, CLIL is a methodology in which a student learns some non-language subjects through a language, which is not his/her normal main language.

Before going to school we all learn language in a natural environment. Language is an instinct. Children are designed to pick up language just as birds are designed to learn how to fly, and spiders are designed to spin fairy’s hammocks. The environment of a young child is full of things he or she learns to use as tools. Language is one of these, and the natural way a child learns its first language can also be used by that child to learn other languages.

All through my teaching experience I have been looking for ways of refreshing my pupils’ minds on the technique they are actually still using in their mother tongue and I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing like a story to get them into the right spirit. From our adult point of view, stories help the children understand the world around them. From the children’s point of view “Once upon a time...” are the magic words, which open the door to a world where anything is possible, and that is a language they are all fluent in.

For years I have been enjoying my teaching, but I must admit there was a permanent shadow over my magical Queen Dom: the teaching of reading and writing was my Wicked Witch. I was convinced deep down, that I was incapable of giving my pupils the key to their independent discovery of what’s inside books. I just did not know how to teach them reading, nothing worked. Now I realise that I lacked an efficient, successful reading and writing method, but at the time I thought it was ‘me’. Reading is one of the main tools we need to give to children who will not have any input of English Language other than the English they practise at school.

By mere chance, five years ago, on the back of a handout from one of the courses a colleague had attended at the British Council in Madrid, I read from very tiny handwriting the words “*Jolly Phonics*”. I searched the Internet and thus entered into the most gratifying part of my teaching career. I now present the sounds through a story, an action and a song. The story gives me the opportunity to develop the children’s vocabulary: we dramatise it, add characters to it, fit it into whatever topic we are developing at school. The children are working in a linguistic context, which is much richer than normally would have been the case, and therefore their own linguistic skills are well developed.

By doing an action for each letter sound, children are using body movement, ears, eyes and speech to help them remember, and this happens with the songs too. The story telling and the multi-sensory experiences are the key to the amazing way that the children learn so quickly not “ONLY” reading and writing: they also develop their analytical skills, their reflective skills, their hypothesizing skills, and they learn to be much greater risk takers in terms of their own linguistic confidence.

I am thrilled! And I am thankful, so very thankful, to all the teachers and educators involved in the development of synthetic phonics. I am well aware of the difficulties you have found trying to ease the path for the children’s and the teachers’ sake. Now I take pride in training teachers in the use of synthetic phonics, feeling I am adding my little grain into this useful task.

One of my five-year-old pupils came up to me the other day holding a storybook in her hands: “Inés, what is *joust*?” I had to look it up in the dictionary before I dressed up with a helmet and a spear and began to ride on a beautiful black horse.

Segovia, January 6th, 2007

Carriacou and Petite Martinique

Update on the Reading Project in Carriacou and Petite Martinique

Can it really be only three years since the project to bring synthetic phonics to Carriacou and Petite Martinique in the Caribbean began? Here is the story so far:

- March 2006: Debbie Hepplewhite, Reading Reform Foundation website editor, received an e-mail from Eileen Measey, volunteer helper at a secondary school in Carriacou in the Caribbean. Eileen wrote that volunteers were struggling to help students learn to read and synthetic phonics might help. Did Debbie know of anyone who would be interested in bringing it to the islands? I volunteered.
- May 2006: my first visit to Carriacou and Petite Martinique, where I met Mrs Gertrude Niles, Education Officer, and visited the six primary and two secondary schools on the islands. I told Gertrude and school principals about synthetic phonics.
- July 2006: Gertrude began teaching her four year old daughter to read using Jolly Phonics and was impressed. She invited me to train teachers on her islands. Eileen got to work raising funds. Donations came from UK publishers, businesses, churches, individuals from the Caribbean and the UK, and so on.
- August 2006: RRF members, Maggie Downie, Susan Godsland, Geraldine Carter and I flew to Grenada and, after some delay and adventure, arrived in Carriacou loaded with donated resources to provide training for teachers, principals, parents and others.
- October and December 2006: I returned to find out how the project was going, give further training as needed, and monitor progress.
- March 2007: The Minister for Education for Grenada visited schools in Carriacou to find out about the impact of synthetic phonics and was convinced that this method worked. Grenada television broadcast a short documentary from Carriacou showing the enthusiasm of children, teachers and principals for this teaching method.
- May 2007, my next visit: two days of meetings with teachers and principals in Carriacou, two days visiting schools and meeting officials in mainland Grenada to discuss training there, a day in St Vincent and a day in Barbados to discuss the possibility of training in those places
- June 2007, my next visit: assessment of children in Carriacou and Petite Martinique, meetings with principals, the minister for education and teachers selected for training other teachers; to mainland Grenada to train pre-

primary and kindergarten teachers from about forty schools, supported by Gertrude and teachers from Carriacou.

- July 2007: The chief education officer for St Vincent confirmed that they would like training there.
- August 2007: training in St Vincent for kindergarten, and grade one to grade three teachers from about fifty schools, supported by Gertrude and kindergarten teacher Nerissa Fortune. Jim Bourgeois, synthetic phonics expert from Canada, originally from Trinidad, came to find out about the training.
- September 2007: Teachers began to arrive regularly on the ferry from mainland Grenada to visit schools in Carriacou to see synthetic phonics in action. Gertrude was given a new job, travelling round Grenada supporting schools as they began to put the method into practice.
- November 2007: Gertrude travelled with her family to England to speak at the Reading Reform Foundation Conference, where she inspired us all. She visited schools in England to meet teachers and see Jolly Phonics, Sound Discovery and Read Write Inc in action.
- May 2008: Jackie Day, of Snappy Lesson and King Wizzit fame, joined me in my latest visit to Carriacou and Petite Martinique. We met with senior education staff and school principals and gave presentations to train new staff and update the training of experienced teachers. While Jackie demonstrated Snappy Lesson with seven to eleven year olds in every primary school on the islands, I worked with eight teachers, chosen by their schools to be phonics leaders. Each of these teachers passed an exam in synthetic phonics and demonstrated presentation skills. They are now expected to support colleagues, advise principals and train new staff. Some were so successful they are now qualified to train other teachers beyond their islands. Go to www.jollylearning.co.uk, Training, Caribbean, to see early years teachers, Emma and Nerissa.
- August 2008: further training in St Vincent. Jim Bourgeois and I were invited to provide a full week of workshops for all pre-primary and kindergarten teachers – consolidation for teachers who had been at the previous sessions and initial training for new teachers.
- May/June 2009: Flights are now booked for Jackie and me to visit again. This is to be my final visit in the role of trainer. Local teachers and education officers, now knowledgeable and experienced, will support colleagues and train new teachers to make sure that the children in their schools learn to read well.

If I wrote all the details about what has happened, you would realise that there have been plenty of problems as well as triumphs along the way. The project is a big success because of all the people who have given time and resources, been determined and, above all, been prepared to change their minds about what works. Teachers are enthusiastic, children are learning, parents are thrilled. The story goes on and there will be another instalment!

Elizabeth Nonweiler

Note: Donations of time, resources and money for the project in Carriacou and Petite Martinique have been used directly and only for that project. Meetings and training in other places have been funded separately.

Reader's Letter

David Nixon,

Audley,

Staffs

Dear Debbie and Lesley,

In your Newsletter 60, it was very worrying to see that both Labour and Conservative controlled Local Education Authorities are trying to wriggle out of the Rose recommendations with regard to synthetic phonics teaching and how the Early Years practitioners are blatantly being told not to teach phonics.

This was exactly what happened in the early 1990s to myself. I criticised the language based Ginn 360 scheme that Staffs LEA were promoting as the best thing since sliced bread. The reading results from the pilot school were said to be exceptional (now because results have to be published they are below average.) One of my sons was struggling with reading at this school and it was then I noticed he had no phonic knowledge. I introduced intensive synthetic

phonics into my Reception class with spectacular results. The inspectors did not like it. They said I would have to go on a re-training course. I resigned because my principles were not going to be tarnished, but as Lesley Drake asks, "Who is going to expose these advisors who are completely against phonics and a formal structure of learning in a Reception class?"

The answer unfortunately is no-one. The LEA advisors etc are accountable to no-one. They do what they wish. The only thing they are interested in is their own empires paid for by you and me, the taxpayers. Having spent 4 years as a County Councillor fighting from within this cancer at the heart of our educational system, whose tentacles now permeate into each classroom, all I can say is that the Liberals set the LEAs up and the Labour and Conservatives keep feeding them to the detriment of our children's education.

Sorry to be pessimistic but nothing will alter while we have an educational establishment that is immune to parental wishes.

Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey, and the Road to Teaching Hell

Brian W King

It seems to me there are currently two poles within educational thinking: sentimentality and science. The first we can trace back at least to Rousseau, but the second only began to emerge with the work of the cognitive psychologists in the last century. Until the observing and measuring of the effects of different (literacy) teaching methods were initiated, anyone with a vaguely relevant academic background (or even without it) could set up as an educational guru on the basis of a philosophy and, very often, a sentimental desire to make life and learning easier for the children of the New Age.

Among the latter there are three who are often taken as a triumvirate of the leading thinkers: Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey. The thing they all have in common, you will notice, is that each has come to education from another field and, not liking the rather regimented teaching typical of the times, has set out to construct a "progressive" new pedagogy on purely theoretical lines. There can be no doubt about their sincerity and philanthropical motivation, but the fact remains that the result of following their precepts has always been sub-optimal progress of the pupils, and especially of that roughly 20% who need the greatest practical help – beginning with literacy. The following summaries of these gurus' philosophies are necessarily truncated, to the point of parody some might think, but I think the essence of their irrelevance to a practical working classroom is reasonably well conveyed.

Piaget was doing a good job on observing molluscs. But he received the call to apply his scientific expertise to child development – who knows why (was it his mad wife or the widespread social suffering during the Depression that aroused tender feelings towards the little ones?), because he always maintained his real allegiance was to biology.

And indeed his approach to the tots was a thoroughly biological one. His BIG IDEA was that the individual growing animal interacted with the environment to obtain equilibrium/survival. Therefore, we must see children as having a similar primary drive to understand the world through physical interaction – into their teens in fact. This will allow them to form their individual concepts, or "schemas". Here we see the link with Vygotsky and his aversion to received knowledge purveyed by the teacher, and with Dewey and his similar ideas. The upshot, in the application of Piaget's biological theory to educational practice, is the advocating in typical progressive methodology of such "kinaesthetic" activities as messing about with bendy letters, as a simultaneous exercise in "reversibility" and (very optimistically) literacy.

Piaget, in fact, saw infants as having mentalities different in kind from those of adults. They had to construct their own understanding of the world, with their own rules, until they achieved logical maturity, and possibly full literacy. The teacher all this while is only a facilitator, not an instructor, and fellow student in fact.

Vygotsky, after floating inconsequentially through various arts courses in Soviet Russia in the 1930s, decided that educational psychology deserved his attention – so much so that he didn't pause to acquire any actual training in the discipline.

His BIG IDEA was that children learn through interaction. He seems to have got his inspiration through the typical progressive route of false analogy: young infants learn purposive behaviour and language by interacting with their parents and older siblings etc.

Therefore, cognitive development in children can only occur through social interaction with the teachers and their peers, (they have knowledge of different kinds too). His famous “zone of proximal development” (early gobbledegook: sounds scientific, impressive to the innocent) is the developmental stage the child has reached through social interaction. The range of “tools” or skills acquired during this prolonged period of suspension of direct teaching will surpass any cognitive progress it can make on its own – by, say, using a textbook. Only after this process will it internalise its knowledge, that is, make it its own.

Although rejected by the Soviet educationalists, who were in fact, developing a strongly selective and therefore individualistic system, the ideas of Vygotsky were enthusiastically received by many tender-hearted officials in the pre-war educational establishment groping for pedagogical clues. They became so deeply embedded that teachers are today given no latitude in their “training” to query why children should be so constantly engaged in peer collaboration and group projects, and why they are seated in groups well past the reception stage so that half of them have their backs to their would-be instructor.

Such interactions have proved to have very little contribution to make in the teaching particularly of literacy, compared with direct teaching by a trained or knowledgeable adult.

John Dewey, the third of the triumvirate of academic thinkers used by university education departments to promote constructivism (children assemble their own equally valid conceptions of the world), had only tangential contact with actual teaching. He spent a couple of years with a US training college, but was generally even further detached from educational practice than the others, as a teacher of/writer on pragmatic moral philosophy.

His BIG IDEA was in fact similar to Piaget's, but on a more philosophical level: the growing human organism interacts with its environment, naturally, and self-guidedly through active manipulation (ring any bells?), reflects critically on its experiences and is thereby in a position to apply its concepts realistically.

Therefore, education should consist largely in providing opportunities for such physical reactions. Passively absorbing facts from the teacher was antithetical to this natural, vital process. The new, progressive school should focus on pupils' judgement rather than their knowledge, their critical thinking rather than their acceptance of received opinion. “Social learning” also figured in Dewey's thinking, and he saw mind as an emerging aspect of human co-operative activity (somewhat in contradiction of the “self-guidedness”). In the classroom this would be manifested in students pursuing their own interests, but somehow in co-operation with their peers.

The trouble with all these theoreticians is their apparent ignorance that what allows infants to understand the world is above all WORDS, which can only be amassed in effective numbers by good early teaching of literacy. Typical of do-gooding progressives, they were well-educated themselves and too detached from state school reality to realise that urgent priority must be given to real literacy over hopeful experiments. The Western world has suffered for four centuries from fanciful ideas in its education, culminating in the literacy crisis of the late 20th century.

Scientific standards must be allowed to prevail from now on.

Why we don't need Reading Recovery; an interview with Shahed Ahmed, Head Teacher at Elmhurst Primary in Newham, London

Lesley Drake

1) Shahed, you have been using a synthetic phonics approach with a structured programme for some time now as your sole method of teaching children to read. What impact has this had on your Special Education Needs (SEN) figures for children struggling with literacy problems?

We find that we are far less likely to put children on the SEN register for literacy, so our numbers of children on 'school action' and 'action plus' are low as compared to other similar schools. Our SEN children respond very well to this structured SEN teaching in small groups, and for those that struggle we provide extra daily 1-1 support to help them to learn their sounds (phonemes), blend and begin to read. It is not rocket science.

2) The Primary National Strategy promotes a three layered approach to teaching, Quality First Teaching, Wave 2 Provision and Wave 3 Provision. What does your Wave 2 and Wave 3 provision for reading look like at Elmhurst?

Our provision is more straightforward and is not an add-on or something different. It's all part of the scheme. For literacy all our children are taught in smaller groups anyway, so the children who struggle get that extra support at their appropriate level. Our teaching is phonic-based for children who are learning how to read, it's structured and progressive. It involves a lot of partner talk. Once children are reading securely they quickly move on to 'real' books. The writing is linked to the reading (something that the literacy strategy did not always do). Teachers also regularly read stories to the children. Then there is daily 1-1 support for children who struggle. It's as simple as that!

3) The government is rolling out the promotion of Reading Recovery to reach the very hardest to shift children at a cost of something like £144 million. Have you worked out what it would cost to have RR in your school for every child that needed wave 3, as compared with the cost of supplying in-house synthetic phonics support?

It would cost much, much more with Reading Recovery. As it is we have trained many of our teaching assistants to do the in-house support and they do it very well, we monitor and support them very carefully. Our leadership team (including me) also do the 1-1. This way we reach many more children than Reading Recovery. Also, our way is very effective; it is so pleasing to see how quickly children begin to read with us.

4) What have been the real benefits for you at Elmhurst in using Ruth Miskin's programme? After all, many people argue that her programme is expensive too.

I think I have covered a lot of this above. Ruth Miskin's programme is a very effective programme that teachers find very supportive. The important thing is that we have someone out of class who goes around supporting and monitoring the teachers and teaching assistants and team-teaching with them. We assess the children regularly and move groups and individuals when needed. Any scheme will only be as good as how well and how rigorously you implement it. Any new teachers and teaching assistants are sent on a two day training programme. This way everyone is equipped to teach reading effectively. This is important in an area like ours which is very deprived and has high mobility. The thing about Reading Recovery is that only one (or two) teachers are trained to deliver it, and they reach far fewer children.

5) In a large school like yours, you must get lots of new admissions during the year. Are you beginning to notice the impact of other schools now using synthetic phonics programmes following the Rose Report?

We assess the children when they join us, but we don't necessarily know if they have come from an synthetic phonics background, so it's hard to make a judgement on this.

6) What about teacher training? This is still a really tough nut to crack. Many student teachers and newly qualified teachers still complain they are not given enough training on phonics. Is this your experience too?

Yes absolutely. We have to do all the training and support ourselves.

7) Another hot issue is whether or not we should be teaching phonics in early years. What line do you take at Elmhurst?

We teach it as a very quick, fun, ten minute interactive session in nursery. The children love it, and they get to reception knowing most of their sounds.

8) What feedback have you had from parents and carers to your approach to teaching reading? Do they get involved?

Parents like it; they say that they can really see their children making progress. We send books home. Also, every Thursday morning we have a parents reading session from reception to year 2 where lots of parents come in and read all sorts of books (not just Ruth Miskin's books) with their children in class.

9) Lastly, what reaction have you had to your taking part in the Dispatches programme?

The biggest reaction has been that they thought I would get on my hands and knees to further demonstrate how a cat laps its milk up! A lot of people have also said that they thought it was good somebody was saying what they themselves had been thinking.

Phil Beadle in conversation

Lesley Drake

“Rank Amateur” Changes Lives!

The theme for our RRF conference this autumn being that of **Waste**, I wondered if Phil Beadle would be willing to talk about his involvement with Adult Literacy, following the hugely damning picture of waste painted in his “Can’t Read, Can’t Write” programmes of the summer. He was more than willing to oblige.

I first asked him how he got from “The Unteachables” to “Can’t read, Can’t Write,” expecting a “lack of basic skills” linking the two, but the answer was not so straightforward. Certainly, some of the children in ‘The Unteachables’ had some literacy issues, but home life played a bigger part for most. For Phil, following the success of “The Unteachables,” winning the “Best on-screen newcomer” award, Channel 4 were keen to offer lots of similar projects, to cash in on a winning formula, with Phil’s Classroom Nightmares” and so on.

However, Phil wanted to tackle a serious issue, one where he would be in the position to learn something useful for himself; and one where he was not going to be involved in casting teachers in a worse light. He held out for a long time before a project and an issue came up that he could be passionate about. That issue was to be the state of Adult Literacy provision in this country.

“I was not sure if I was the right person. I didn’t have a clue how to teach reading. Where Linda and James were concerned I asked for support and was put in touch with Cynthia Klein and Foufou Savitzky, dyslexia experts from Lifelong Learning UK. What the programme shows is that phonics, even in the hands of a rank amateur, could do it.”

What reaction has Phil had from the world of Adult Literacy since the programmes went out? Some was positive, from people who said well done for calling the core curriculum for the poorly conceived sham it is, but mainly, it was the equivalent of sticking their fingers in their ears and singing, “La La La!”

Being the most high profile teacher in the country means that upwards of half a million educators watch the programmes Phil makes. “They are,” he says, “the ultimate lesson observation,” and for many the motivation is to pick holes in what he does, in order to make themselves feel better about their own abilities. Phil is fairly relaxed about this, “I’ve learned – only recently - to cope with it. If you have a voice, it is an intrinsic part of having that voice, that people will question whether you deserve it. I see myself a little as the boy in the street calling the emperor to account for being naked. I am glad our society allows someone to play such a role, but it ain’t all champagne and roses. There are occasions when organisations aren’t too happy for an individual to take a public stand against the lies that pay their wages.”

However, the press release from NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education still rankles. Following the second part of the programme where he had had a minor disagreement with Linda, the press release from NIACE was along the lines of “Go, girl, go!” Comments about his hair and vague statements like “he is misinformed” were perhaps a little less sophisticated than anyone raising questions as profound and as simple as, ‘Why don’t adult literacy courses use phonics?’ would have a right to expect. “The idiots,” says Phil, “who cannot justify their argument, will resort to attacking the person presenting the argument. Adult literacy is the vested interest of such idiots in this country. Anyone who dares tell the truth about phonics is sacked or satirised as being ‘misinformed’.”

"The whole curriculum promotes a series of guessing games, they call whole word recognition. I could see some point in these, but only as a line of exceptional processing, but you must teach phonics first. You must teach the code first. 'Other strategies' are supplemental."

At this point, Phil really got into his stride. "At present, the provision for people who can't read at all is a series of activities for the mentally deficient; they say it's all about balance. Speaking and listening doesn't help you decode the building blocks. They don't need speaking and listening. They need the code. These people have huge barriers to overcome just to get to the class. The Entry 1 materials are designed for people who can only read a tiny bit. In the first module, phonics appears on page 14 and teaches the "sh" sound. It appears 16 times before they reach that point. The materials are illogical and incompetent. A proper Adult Literacy programme desperately needs to be written, and made statutory, but the adult literacy 'professionals', and I use this in inverted commas, have too much invested in it, to admit that well-taught phonics is the answer; and that they have been swallowing and producing bullshit for their whole adult lives."

What of the individuals who appeared in the programmes? How have they fared since the series ended? Theresa, the gran who couldn't go out shopping alone and couldn't read with her grandchildren, now helps at a local school. John is being helped by a synthetic phonics expert, and has written his autobiography. Linda is "off doing enigmatic things!" and Kelly is now on a Foundation course. Learning to read has changed her life. James had loads of one-to-one help, but this did not always appear on camera due to copyright issues with the reading materials they used with him. Phil reports he could read CVC words when James stopped coming to lessons, long after the cameras stopped filming. Like many others in his situation, he needs help from those around him if he is to succeed.

At many points in our conversation, Phil refers to himself as a rank amateur. He wrote a song for the programme and used cuh and tuh in the song, "but improved as time went on."

I know many very positive remarks about the programmes were made on the RRF message board at the time, qualified by people wishing Phil had had more advice on the requisite techniques. For me though, this was the most powerful message. Look at what can be achieved with a bunch of people who have been let down by not being taught the code, by a "rank amateur" who threw the useless Adult Literacy materials in the bin and got them blending. Hopefully, bodies like NIACE will have to shift their position and take on board the arguments for code based instruction for those who have had enough of their lives wasted already.

Using your high profile to do good is an honourable thing to do, so thank you Phil for sticking your neck out and not remaking "The Unteachables". Or, as the "Rank Amateur" ended our conversation by saying, "A television programme that actually did unmitigated good. Now there's a novelty."





