



AFTER THE LITERACY HOUR

MAY THE BEST PLAN WIN!

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THE AUTHOR

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© Centre for Policy Studies, March 2004

ISBN No: 1 903219 83 0

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Printed by The Centre for Policy Studies, 57 Tufton Street, SW1.

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

1. THE FAILURE OF THE LITERACY HOUR	1
2. THE CLACKMANNANSHIRE TRIALS	3
3. WHAT IS SYNTHETIC PHONICS?	5
4. ILLITERACY AND THE BREAKDOWN OF DISCIPLINE	7
5. BEYOND THE LITERACY HOUR: THE WAY FORWARD	9

SUMMARY

- The Literacy Hour was launched in 1998. Since then, 1,188,000 children have left primary school with poor literacy skills.
- A programme of *synthetic* phonics introduced in Clackmannanshire by the Scottish Office has reduced the rate of reading failure to near zero – even with disadvantaged pupils.
- The latest research indicates that the advantage enjoyed by pupils of the synthetic phonics over pupils taught by other methods has increased to 3½ years in reading, and almost two years in spelling.
- Synthetic phonics bears little resemblance to the ‘phonics’ in the Literacy Hour.
- Reading failure is almost certainly a major factor in the breakdown of discipline in many schools.
- The House of Commons Select Committee on Education is expected to recommend further trials in England and Wales. It is essential that the Government heeds this advice. Teachers will not adopt synthetic phonics until they understand *how* it works, and *how well* it works.
- To ensure that the trials are fair, they must be directed by disinterested parties, and monitored by the Office of National Statistics.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FAILURE OF THE LITERACY HOUR

When the Literacy Hour was launched in 1998, David Blunkett made a much-publicised promise to resign in 2002 unless at least 80% of 11-year-olds met the expected standard on the 11+ English SATs (National Curriculum Tests). At that time, the ‘pass’ rate was 65%, which seemed a considerable improvement on the 1995 pass rate of 48%, but which was still shockingly low. By 2000, the pass rate was up to 75%, and it appeared that Blunkett would be home and dry.

However, if something seems too good to be true, it probably is. Tony Gardiner, a mathematician from Birmingham University, claimed that such a rate of improvement was statistically impossible, and that:

Repeated improvements of three or more percentage points a year (to say nothing of the jump from 1998 to 1999) are so brazenly innumerate that it is hard not to conclude that someone has been quietly pressuring those who set and mark the questions.¹

After the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found serious inadequacies in the ‘anchoring’ process which was supposed to ensure that scoring remained consistent from year to year, the pass rate has stuck at 75%.² There are still

¹ T Gardiner, “Results don’t add up”, letter, *The Independent*, September 22, 2000.

² P Tymms, “Are standards rising in English primary schools?” *British Educational Research Journal* 30:4, August 2004.

widespread suspicions that standards are worse than official tests allow; the headmaster of a South Wales comprehensive said “Some of these children are coming in with [passes] in all three subjects and they are barely literate”.³ The author has personal experience of pupils who ‘passed’ their English tests although they were on the special needs register for poor literacy skills.

Nearly 1,200,000 pupils have been failed by the Literacy Hour – 1,200,000 children whose education has been largely wasted because they failed before they had really even started.

However, even if one accepts that Level 4 is an acceptable standard of literacy, the National Literacy Strategy will still have failed well over one million children, as the following table shows:

	No. of Pupils	Percentage of pupils failing to achieve Level 4 in English tests at Key Stage 2	Number failing key stage 2
1998	607,700	35%	212,700
1999	628,700	30%	188,600
2000	623,300	25%	155,800
2001	633,400	25%	158,400
2002	641,000	25%	160,300
2003	637,100	25%	159,300
2004	612,300	25%	153,100
Total			1,188,200

Sources: DfES.

Nearly 1.2 million pupils have been failed by the Literacy Hour – 1.2 million children whose education has been largely wasted because they failed before they had really even started. Considering the effect this has had on the parents and the teachers of these children, the human misery behind this statistic is appalling.

³ *Times Educational Supplement*, 10 May 2002, p 29.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CLACKMANNANSHIRE TRIALS

For the last seven years, the Scottish Office has been sponsoring trials of a new system of teaching reading – a method known as ‘synthetic phonics’. When the first year’s results were announced in 1998, *The Scotsman* hailed it as “the Holy Grail in education”. *The Times Educational Supplement* said:

A radical way of teaching children to read has easily outperformed the Government’s preferred literacy strategy. [It] has produced remarkable results in even the most deprived schools...it ought to spark a serious rethink of the Government’s National Literacy Strategy in England.⁴

At the time, sceptics suggested that these early gains would disappear after a few years. Yet on 12 February 2005 – six years after the initial report – the Scottish Office announced that the advantage of the synthetic phonics pupils had *increased* to a staggering 3½ years in reading, and almost two years in spelling.⁵ Perhaps almost as remarkable was the reversal of the ‘gender gap’ – boys outscored girls in all areas. Pupils from disadvantaged homes did virtually as well as their more fortunate peers. These results have

⁴ *The Times Educational Supplement*, 19 February 1999.

⁵ R S Johnston and J E Watson, “A seven year study of the effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading attainment”, *Insight 17*, Scottish Executive, 12 February 2005.

received considerable publicity, and the Government is now under pressure to 'do something'. Up until now, the DfES position has been that the official strategy includes the synthetic phonics used in the Clackmannanshire project.

The advantage enjoyed by pupils of synthetic phonics has now increased to a staggering 3½ years in reading, and almost two years in spelling.

Although this is technically true, synthetic phonics plays a very minor role in the Literacy Hour, and the methods are based upon completely different concepts of how reading should be taught.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT IS SYNTHETIC PHONICS?

With synthetic phonics, children are taught the English spelling code from the ground up. They are taught letter sounds, and how they blend into words. Next they are taught the two-letter combinations, such as ‘ee’ and ‘sh’. They learn common irregular words, which are much easier to learn after synthetic skills have been learnt. At the same time, they are taught to work from sound to letters. When all this has been mastered, they learn to add prefixes and suffixes, and compound words such as ‘playground’. They learn less common spelling patterns, such as the hard ‘ch’ in ‘chemist’. It is a simple, logical and elegant approach.

And it works. When taught this way, children can learn far faster than most teachers would ever think possible. Because mastery is assured at each stage of learning, children are seldom confused. Because they are always succeeding, they never get discouraged.

Most children are reading independently in the very first term of Reception Year. By contrast, 31% of 7-year-olds can’t read a simple children’s story without help – this is after almost three years of the Literacy Hour.

But perhaps the best way to explain synthetic phonics is to explain what is *not* done. Children are *not* taught to recognise words as ‘wholes’ at any time – which is the main strategy taught to beginners in the Literacy Hour. They are *not* taught to ‘guess’ unknown words from context, a practice which is all but universal in English-speaking countries. And most surprisingly, they are

not given books until they have enough skill to read all (or almost all) of the words without recourse to guessing.

In synthetic phonics, children are not taught to recognise words as 'wholes' at any time; they are not taught to 'guess' unknown words from context; and they are not given books until they have enough skill to read without recourse to guessing.

The Literacy Hour, by contrast, is not a coherent strategy. It was designed through consultation with all of the various factions in the 'reading wars', and it includes sops to each. In consequence, it is something of a dog's breakfast of competing and often contradictory strategies, which leave many children hopelessly confused. It is so complex that teachers have to adopt a 'tick box' mentality to make sure that everything has been covered. As a result, nothing gets covered very well, and only the quick survive. The system is failing those in greatest need of help.

CHAPTER FOUR

ILLITERACY AND THE BREAKDOWN OF DISCIPLINE

In many schools, indiscipline is giving way to anarchy. Even in the most favoured schools, teachers are losing control. In one City of Norwich School, which serves the élite Eaton and Cringleford suburbs. Ofsted reports that “Students do still tend to have above average socio-economic backgrounds”⁶, and a respectable 60% of its pupils achieve at least 5 A-C grades at GCSE. Yet a teacher known to the author claims that their pupils are frequently out of control; and that he recently saw a supply teacher cowering, as his pupils stood on their desks and pelted him with paper aeroplanes. This, of course, is mild compared to the behaviour in many less-favoured schools, where pupils assault and spit at teachers with impunity.

There are, of course, many causes of school indiscipline. And correlation does not imply causation. However, the correlation between illiteracy and delinquency is so strong that it would be foolish to deny the possibility expressed by one researcher at the US Department of Justice:

Sufficient evidence from experimental research indicates that sustained frustration not only can cause aggressive anti-social behavior, but that in a school setting, reading failure meets all the

⁶ 2004 Ofsted report on City of Norwich School, p. 3.

requirements for bringing about and maintaining the frustration level that frequently leads to delinquency.⁷

At very least, there can be little question that illiterate pupils place huge strains on our schools. Although no reliable figures exist, in 2000 John Marks estimated that ‘special needs’ could cost as much as £7 billion a year, or about one-third of all spending on schools.⁸ Educational psychologist Martin Turner estimates that the main problem of about 75% of the pupils recognised as having special needs is that they cannot read;⁹ the author’s experience would put the figure at closer to 90%.

The cost of illiteracy is high, both in terms of the wasted potential of the individuals concerned and in terms of the strains it imposes on schools.

But the real cost is the wasted potential in Britain’s human capital. Leading psychologist Keith Stanovich puts it like this:

Slow reading acquisition has cognitive, behavioral, and motivational consequences that slow the development of other cognitive skills and inhibit performance on many academic tasks. In short, as reading develops, other cognitive processes linked to it track the level of reading skill...The longer this developmental sequence is allowed to continue, the more generalized the deficits will become, seeping into more and more areas of cognition and behavior. Or to put it more simply – and sadly – in the words of a tearful nine-year-old, already falling frustratingly behind his peers in reading progress, “Reading affects everything you do”.¹⁰

⁷ M S Brunner, *Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential*, Halcyon House, 1993, p. 34.

⁸ J Marks, *What are special educational needs? An analysis of a new growth industry*, Centre for Policy Studies, p. 18.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 23

¹⁰ K E Stanovich, “Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy”, *Reading Research Quarterly* 21, 1986, p. 390.

CHAPTER FIVE

BEYOND THE LITERACY HOUR: THE WAY FORWARD

The House of Commons Select Committee on Education, which has been taking evidence to evaluate the Scottish Office report on synthetic phonics, is expected to recommend that further trials be conducted in England and Wales. This offers the Government a relatively painless way out of its dilemma. Just over two years ago, Minette Marrin commented in the *Sunday Times* that

Privately I have heard that Tony Blair has sent a message to the national numeracy and literacy advisors that they have only a year left to get their act together or he will scrap the literacy (and numeracy) strategy.¹¹

This report could be true. In March, 2003, the DfES conducted a phonics seminar at which leading advocates of synthetic phonics put their case; considering their position on the subject, it is hardly likely that officials would have done so without pressure from above.

Yet the Government's dilemma is all too obvious. Having made political capital by trumpeting that the Literacy Hour is working, it will be politically awkward for them to abandon it suddenly. But abandon it they must.

¹¹ *Sunday Times*, 1 December 2002.

The tide of opinion is changing. On 20 February 2005, the *Observer* carried a scathing attack on the Literacy Hour. Geraldine Bedell made the comment that:

Educational liberals, those of us who believe that the education system is too narrow, prescriptive, test-based, and miserably obsessed with grading, should be embracing synthetic phonics with relief.

Even the stalwarts in the DfES, who have long been in denial about synthetic phonics, are reported to be wobbling.

Extended trials of synthetic phonics would extricate the Government from its predicament and could persuade teachers that they can be part of the process (as opposed to just being the recipients of another bright idea dropped from on high).

TRIALS: THE SOLUTION TO THE DILEMMA

In ordering extended trials of synthetic phonics, the Government can spare itself the embarrassment of disavowing the Literacy Hour, and maintain the pretence that this is merely a means of enhancing it.

However, the Government must not entrust such trials to the DfES, which has nurtured and defended the Literacy Hour for a decade, rejecting evidence for synthetic phonics which – to outsiders – appears to be clear. And if the trials are to gain the confidence of the teaching profession, control will have to be vested in independent organisations with a reputation for impartiality and academic rigour. Universities such as Durham and Manchester, which have sponsored high-quality studies on monitoring reading standards, are obvious choices. The ONS, which has done well to scrutinise the pass rate of the National Literacy Strategy, could also have a role.

The trials should be conducted in schools that agree to participate on a voluntary basis. They should be open to any organisation – commercial or otherwise – which has a reading programme with a credible track record. The synthetic phonics programme developed by Watson and Johnston for the Scottish Office trials is one of many. Giving schools a choice would help persuade the teaching profession that they are part of the process, instead of just being the recipients of yet another bright idea dropped down from on high. Trials should be as extensive as possible, and should include schools that are as diverse as possible in terms of geography and social class.

There is little time to lose. Every month of dithering is another month in which too many of Britain's children will continue to be short-changed. Tony Blair has the chance to make our primary schools first in the English-speaking world in terms of literacy – certainly, the fiasco of the Literacy Hour would soon be forgotten if, as *The Scotsman* put it, he were to find “the Holy Grail of education”.