

Ready to Read?

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Summary

- Systematic synthetic phonics will now be the first and prime method used to teach reading in state schools.
- The decision to drop the chaotic National Literacy Strategy method of teaching reading is a direct response to the grave level of illiteracy which the New Labour flagship literacy model has failed to impact on.
- The move to ‘first and fast’ synthetic phonics signifies the government’s final rejection of so-called ‘child-centred’ methods.
- Poor achievement and related poor behaviour in secondary schools as well as the vast increase in the number of young people not in education, employment or training connect directly to poor literacy teaching at primary school level.
- Weak reading lies at the heart of both the educational apartheid between the advantaged and disadvantaged and stalled social mobility. The inability to read properly is the single greatest handicap to progress both in school and adult life.
- Systematic synthetic phonics is likely to be a highly effective way of tackling both our educational and social problems today. Evidence from longitudinal academic research as well as from Civitas’ own Supplementary School project has shown that teaching children to read via systematic synthetic phonics can bridge the gap between readers from disadvantaged and advantaged homes better than any other method has so far managed.
- *However*, having witnessed the nation-wide enforcement of the flawed National Literacy Strategy, we warn strongly against central prescription which, by definition, does not allow for individual differences in context and classroom and erodes teacher professionalism and responsiveness to pupils’ needs.

Introduction

‘The ability to read is the key to educational achievement. Without a basic foundation in literacy, children cannot gain access to a rich and diverse curriculum. Poor literacy limits opportunities not only at school, but throughout life, both economically and in terms of a wider enjoyment and appreciation of the written word.’

Education and Skills Select Committee, 2005¹

As of this week, systematic ‘synthetic phonics’ will become the first and main step in teaching children to read in primary school. This will mean that children’s first experience in school of learning to read will be to learn 44 letter sounds which they will be taught to blend together - or ‘synthesise’ - to form words.

¹ Summary of the Education and Skills Select Committee report into teaching children to read, April 2005

The re-emergence of this methodology signifies the government's realisation that the now nearly ten-year-old National Literacy Strategy has left too many children unable to read properly. Despite huge investment in time, training and materials and a primary school curriculum shrunk to accommodate the National Literacy Strategy, reading amongst English children remains a critical problem, the effects of which we are now witnessing in a cohort of secondary school pupils unequipped with basic literacy.

According to the government's own figures, 16 per cent of primary school leavers are not achieving the expected level in reading.² The number of children unable to read well is actually likely to be much higher: in the words of the Education and Skills Select Committee '... data generated through the Key Stage tests can be skewed by associated factors, such as teachers "teaching to the test"...' ³ Yet as the committee says, even if the government's official figure is taken at 'face value', the number of poor readers leaving primary school is still 'unacceptably high'.⁴

Indeed, secondary schools are now witnessing the consequences of this scenario. Many pupils are finding themselves without the basic literacy and numeracy skills to work at the expected level. So prevalent is this problem that the government has had to resort to freeing up the secondary curriculum to allow for 'catch-up' classes, or to use their euphemism, 'personalised learning'. The root cause of the weaknesses in secondary pupils' knowledge and skills relates directly to the inadequacies in the teaching of reading in primary school.

The wider repercussions of this alarming situation take various forms ranging from poor behaviour, now particularly rife in secondary schools, to truancy and absconding from school altogether. The million-plus young people not in education, employment or training are a very visible indictment of the government's failure to improve the teaching of reading.

The aim of the National Literacy Strategy, rolled out by New Labour in 1998, was to make as many children as possible good readers by eradicating the inconsistency in reading standards between schools. Sadly, this government has so far not managed to impact sufficiently on the reading gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged. Its failures in the teaching of reading lie at the heart of this, a fact that ministers have acknowledged. In the words of David Miliband, one-time Schools Minister, '...the bad news is that when it comes to the link between educational achievement and social class, Britain is at the bottom of the league for industrialised countries'.⁵ Ruth Kelly, a former Education Secretary, has echoed this admission: '...it appears that we have not managed to narrow the gap between attainment of children from lower and higher income families'.⁶

² National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stage 2, 7th August 2007
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000737/SFR24-2007.pdf>

³ Summary of the Education and Skills Select Committee report into teaching children to read, April 2005

⁴ Summary of the Education and Skills Select Committee report into teaching children to read, April 2005

⁵ *Independent*, 8th September 2003, speech given to an IPPR conference, Newcastle

⁶ <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,1536346,00.html>

Nevertheless, the government has found it difficult to admit that its expensive and highly prescriptive National Literacy Strategy was critically flawed from the start. Not keen to sign-post any U-turns, the government has argued that the introduction of ‘first and fast’ phonics into the National Literacy Strategy, which will in fact be a fundamental change, constitutes little more than a tweak here and a clarification there.⁷ Tony Blair frequently liked to say that English pupils came third out of 35 in the 2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). However, scrutiny of this single piece of evidence shows not only that the high achievers in the international test had generally learnt to read *prior* to the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy but also that England’s performance exposed our greatest problem: a reading ‘long-tail’.⁸ In other words, highly dispersed levels of literacy with a large group in society remaining semi-illiterate or illiterate.

We cannot underestimate the impact of poor reading skills. Research by the Basic Skills Agency has looked at a cohort born in a single week in 1970, who were classified as being at risk of social exclusion in childhood. The study, *Basic Skills and Social Exclusion*, found that poor readers were both twice as likely to be unemployed at 30 and have experienced a continuous period of unemployment for over a year. The study also showed that poor readers, on average, earned about £2 less per hour than the average wage. The women who were poor readers were also disproportionately likely to become single mothers. Weak readers were also more likely to suffer ill health and depression.⁹

This report examines what systematic synthetic phonics entails. It briefly explores a background to the teaching of reading and explains the historical and political significance of reading pedagogies. The report ultimately argues that a greater emphasis on teaching synthetic phonics appears to be most likely to prove effective at closing the persistent gap between social classes. However, we conclude, by reflecting on historical precedents and the nature of the political debate in education, that it is undesirable for *any* pedagogy to be made the subject of central dictation.

So what is ‘systematic synthetic phonics’?

‘...synthetic phonics... is a very accelerated form of phonics that does not begin by establishing an initial sight vocabulary’.

Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson, Scottish Executive Education Department, 2005¹⁰

Systematic synthetic phonics (hereafter referred to as ‘synthetic phonics’) is a method of teaching reading.* Its focus is on the 44 sounds used in the English language and the corresponding individual letters and letter combinations that are used to denote

⁷ Robinson, V., ‘Phonics: where has the National Literacy Strategy really got to?’ Reading Reform Foundation, Newsletter 54, Spring Term, 2005

⁸ Clarke, M., ‘How much can we learn from international reading studies such as PIRLS?’, Newman College of Higher Education

⁹ *Times Education Supplement*, 28th June 2002, ‘Reading Can Unlock Door to Inclusion’

¹⁰ ‘The effect of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment,’ R.S. Johnston and J.E. Watson, ‘A Seven Year Study of the Effects of Synthetic Phonics Teaching on Reading and Spelling Attainment: synthetic phonics’, Scottish Executive Education Department, 2005

* There are two ‘types’ of phonics: synthetic and analytic. The basic difference between the two methods of decoding is that with synthetic phonics the sounds identified with letters are learnt in isolation and then blended together. With analytic phonics, by contrast, the sounds associated with letters are *not* pronounced in isolation.

them. Synthetic phonics teaches children the letter/sound correspondences, how to ‘sound out’ the individual letters in words, and then blend (or ‘synthesise’) the sounds into words. The theory is that once these basic letter/sound correspondences are grasped, most words in the English language can be decoded without difficulty, allowing children’s reading vocabulary to expand. This is a very common-sense way to teach reading (a language with only 26 letters and 44 sounds); certainly phonics was perhaps closest to how children traditionally became literate, until the latter half of the 20th century.

In order to see how it differs from more recent methods, it is perhaps useful to examine what synthetic phonics leaves out rather than what it has to offer:

- ‘Whole word’ recognition, a technique used by more experienced readers to read more rapidly once they are familiar with the ‘shape’ of words, is not taught in a synthetic phonics course. The assumption is that such skills will be picked up as children become more proficient at decoding.
- ‘Picture cues’ are not integral to synthetic phonics. The attention of the reader is drawn to letters and words at all times. There is no attempt to encourage children to ‘discover’ whole words by reference to illustrations.
- Synthetic phonics does not focus on the meaning of words as part of this technique. Once a child is proficient at decoding words synthetically, it would be perfectly possible for them to read entire sentences without understanding their meaning. According to the synthetic phonic method, the principles and mechanics of letter sounds must exist prior to engaging with a text on a comprehension or interpretive level. As children become equipped with these principles, a new focus on comprehension (as well as grammar) becomes possible.

Hence, one of the main features of synthetic phonics is that it structures reading into a relatively strict hierarchy of techniques:

- Connecting sounds to letters and letter combinations
- Blending multiple sounds into words
- Combining words into sentences
- Understanding and comprehension

Some, however, have reservations about teaching children to read this way. Criticisms levelled at synthetic phonics range from its being a boring and overly ‘robotic’ process to the argument that it limits the range of books available to early learners.¹¹ However, taught to young children, especially in the fun ways which have become available, there is no reason to think that learning letter sounds need be boring – particularly for small children. Moreover, equipping children with the sounds together with the tools of blending can make for a very exciting discovery experience. This, in turn, relates to criticisms that learning early systematic phonics is robotic when, on the contrary, imparting this self-teaching method appears to be very empowering for children because it ultimately allows them to decode words without adult help. This

¹¹ For example, the Early Years Curriculum Group reported in the *Guardian*, 20th March 2006, ‘Schools to use synthetic phonics to teach reading’

relates to a third criticism of early phonics, namely that it limits the books available for children. However, precisely because children are given an initial ‘toolkit’, they are able to explore a far greater range of texts than they would through other methods because they can decode words that have not been learnt by sight. Indeed, synthetic phonics is perhaps the fastest way to utilise a child’s oral comprehension to support their reading comprehension. Words that may be unfamiliar on the page (but known by sound) can be, as it were, unlocked by sounding them out. Therefore, a method often dismissed as mechanistic and remote from the pleasures of reading actually actively promotes greater comprehension.

The crux of the issue is that ‘being literate’ suggests being able to read with precision, regardless of context. Of course the ultimate purpose of reading is comprehension. As a result, some advocate an initial emphasis on comprehension rather than precision of reading. The difficulty with this is that, without precision, accurate comprehension is also likely to be severely impaired. If you cannot access the words themselves, then you are going to have much greater difficulty comprehending them. This suggests that the techniques of synthetic phonics seem to be the initial *sine qua non* of reading.

The vast majority of reading courses do incorporate some form of phonic technique at some stage. However, the essential components of effective synthetic phonics teaching are that it is taught right at the beginning of learning to read, is systematic and is undiluted by other methods: a short, sharp course of instruction.

These are the very features which put systematic synthetic phonics at odds with an educational establishment which has been a dominant force since the latter half of the twentieth century.

Determinants in the teaching of reading since 1944

‘...in the case of education, the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves.’

Douglas Jay, *The Socialist Case*, 1937

The state had been playing a progressively greater role in the provision of education since the nineteenth century. From 1944, education was made both universally available and compulsory up to the age of 15. Since then, literacy for all has been both the goal and responsibility of the state. During that time, while the aim has remained the same, there have been significant shifts in government policy on the teaching of reading. However, the standards of reading amongst pupils have changed very little since 1948, in spite of escalated urgency for universal literacy in a ‘knowledge economy’.¹²

Despite unprecedented emphasis and investment in education from the latter half of the twentieth century, much potential has been lost through experimental trends in pedagogies. This new thinking was initially welcomed by an explicitly socialist Labour Party administration but ironically *locked* into place by the managerialist Conservative government in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What is so striking is quite how susceptible the ‘gentleman in Whitehall’ has been to the ebb and flow, not

¹² Brooks, G., NFER ‘Trends in standards of literacy in the United Kingdom, 1948-1996’, July 1997 <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00000650.htm>

of academic research evidence, but of the political ideology ensconced within many academic institutions.

Unintentionally, Whitehall would allow state education to become the test laboratory, not for those concerned primarily with teaching, but for social critics. Two concurrent causes triggered this. Firstly, the government funded universities to oversee teacher training. Secondly, the theories that were in the ascendant at universities began to influence the pedagogy that was imparted through teacher training.

The government's take-over of teacher training began when the 1944 McNair report led to 100 major teacher training colleges being grouped together in order to '...supervise the academic work of individual institutions, secure cooperation between them and advise the Minister of Education on the approval teachers and the promotion of the study of education'.¹³ It was during this overhaul that universities initially gained formal control over teacher training courses: 'The outcome of McNair... was both to establish initial teacher training as a legitimate university responsibility and to reinforce the university connection.'¹⁴

By 1963, following the report of the Robbins Committee on Higher Education, teacher training shifted to concentrate on '...the intellectual development of student teachers and the focus was on the theoretical and cognitive approach to teaching'. Potential teachers were also 'to explore their professional identity and purpose'. This was the opportunity for academic disciplines such as sociology to gain a foothold in practical educational training. The intention was to make teaching into a profession equivalent to medicine or law but the inadvertent consequence was to allow experimental theories to become engrained within teacher training.

What did these theories signify? The key influence was Lev Vygotsky, a post-revolutionary Soviet psychologist. He originally developed the highly influential theory of *social constructivism* and Vygotsky's work continues to be a central component of the theory in teacher training today. The main tenets of *social constructivism* are controversial, but fairly common within contemporary sociology and philosophy. According to them, knowledge is socially defined, a product of human activity incapable of referring to an objective reality. Because knowledge can only ever operate within a social context, the only meaningful learning is a communal activity involving engagement with other learners, rather than an individual pursuit or a passive act driven by a teacher. Another major figure in the development of *social constructivism* was the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget who pioneered a theory of child development that was heavily based on discovery, rather than passive learning.

For education generally, this concept translated into 'child-centred' theories of learning. This means learning which is adapted to children's development. Piaget encapsulates this in his model with four developmental stages (sensory-motor, intuitive thought, concrete operations, formal operations). According to this theory, children can only learn at their own pace and through discovery at whatever level they have reached. Learning cannot be a 'passive' act, imposed upon children, but has to

¹³ Totterdell, M. S., 'Teacher Education and Schools: Taking the Parenthesis from Around Partnership, Institute of Education', Manchester Metropolitan University, Universities Council for the Education of Teachers

¹⁴ *ibid*

be driven by the child's own search for knowledge. Teaching cannot force children into a particular mould, but has to be a collaborative exercise where adults are facilitators rather than instructors. The problematic contention was not the positive benefits of 'discovery learning', but rather its lack of direction and, in practice, unsystematic approach. Crucially, a component of this model was the complete rejection of any remotely 'traditional' teacher-directed learning. Indeed, it did not so much condemn traditional teaching as blankly deny that it could impart any learning at all.

How was this realised in the teaching of reading? The notion of 'whole language' learning was central to this approach. Whole language supporters argue that reading is acquired naturally in a similar way that talking is learnt informally. They believe that not only is phonics unnecessary, but that it can actually be harmful. Whole language proponents argue that children discover for themselves the way to decode words simply through exposure to 'rich literacy environments'. As Professor Kevin Wheldall of Australia's Macquarie University Special Education Centre has said: 'Whole language exponents... are portrayed as children's champions in the fight for liberty and equality.'¹⁵ This he contrasts with their perception of phonics as 'a mindless robotic drill' that undermines children's autonomy.

Writing in 1993 in the *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Morag Styles and Mary Jane Drummond described this shift in favour of whole language learning in a positive light: 'Instead of phonic drills and low level texts for simple decoding, children were to be given quality literature from the start and encouraged to do what emergent readers have always done spontaneously: to make sense of text by using the context, the pictures, their previous knowledge of stories and their (mainly implicit) understanding of how language works.'¹⁶

In other words, the model techniques for reading a text was transformed from applying simple rules to a series of letters into an explorative and creative project, perhaps similar to deciphering hieroglyphics or analysing a work of art. And, of course, much of children's literature in whole language learning did place a new emphasis on graphic aids. The meaning of any given text was to be put right at the centre of child learning from the beginning. Styles and Drummond argued this meant that a child '...is taught to behave like a reader, engaging with the meaning of the text, and responding to it, thoughtfully, as readers do'. It combined pictures with previous knowledge and encouraged children to test out narratives on the text to see which one fitted the various textual clues. By this stage, the early 1990s, the most recommended text on booklists on teacher training courses was a book by Liz Waterland. The orthodoxy in this book was the centrality of 'real' books for early reading teaching in place of purpose written reading schemes. Waterland described phonics as merely '...a small part of reading'.¹⁷

The problem was that this position had to relegate phonics to being just one minor source of clues, not because of evidence that it was ineffective, but because

¹⁵ Wheldall K., *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10th April 2006, Comment: 'Opponents have got it wrong on phonics'

¹⁶ Styles, M. & Drummond, M. J. (1993), 'Editorial', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 23:1, 3 - 13

¹⁷ Beard, R., 'Not the whole story of the National Literacy Strategy - a response to Dominic Wyse,' *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol.29, No.6, December 2003, p920

systematic teaching of it did not fit the model of child-centred learning or learning by discovery. Phonics was often ruled out on doctrinal grounds rather than out of genuine concern for keeping reading fun.

At the same time, 'whole language' theory had become very much an element of a larger background ideology in academia. The purpose of literacy teaching, in the minds of the academic establishment, seemed to undergo a shift, from simply raising every child's educational horizons, to playing a role in the radical transformation of society: 'There are dragons stalking the landscape whose power to oppress must be opposed if literacy is to flourish... competition, inequality and institutionalised failure will not be vanquished by a hope or a prayer.' Reading courses and children's reading books suddenly acquired a far greater significance, criticised for their alleged ideological inadequacies and backwardness. One set of reading books, the *Key Words* series, was denounced not for its methodology but because it '...portrayed a stereotyped white, middle-class, male-dominated family that seems laughable today'. Peter and Jane books were condemned as simply 'infamous' and *The Village With Three Corners* series supposedly described stories about 'rural non-entities'.¹⁸

The political (and strikingly urban) bias within such pronouncements is palpable. Yet this was in a discussion about which books children, who cannot even read fluently at this stage, should be exposed to. The intricate mechanisms of literacy, and introducing them to children, had taken a backseat to the question of how many black and ethnic minority characters should appear in the accompanying pictures, and whether the stories should be set on a council estate or in the Cotswolds.

As always when an ideology takes hold of a system that is not held accountable to those that really rely on it, its proponents had become unquestioning about the validity of all their beliefs, and hysterical when challenged from the outside. Ultimately, the inevitable backlash against this entrenched position would be equally harmful.

In order to break up what they perceived as a dangerous ideology extending over the school sector, the Conservatives introduced a notion of 'managerialism' into the classroom. The 1980s managerial structural model and its associated principles of so-called 'organisational excellence' were applied by the Conservatives throughout the public services. Attempts to achieve this notion of efficiency and excellence in schools led to a string of education policies which increased control over the day-to-day running of schools. Central to the appropriation of this control was the introduction of the National Curriculum, brought in under the 1988 Education Act. The introduction of target-setting and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) by John Major in 1992 acted to intensify this commandeering. Powers over education granted in the 1988 Education Act and subsequently are said to have made '...the secretary of education, the envy of totalitarian regimes throughout the world'.¹⁹

What is interesting – and ironic – about this tightening of the bridle and bit of central control is what it led to in practice. With the educational establishment still very much leftwing and influential within the Department of Education, the enforcement tactics of managerialism were applied to disseminate the dominant 'progressive' pedagogy,

¹⁸ Styles, M. & Drummond, M. J. (1993), 'Editorial', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 23:1, 3 - 13

¹⁹ Spear, E.C. 'The changing pressure on Primary schools' in Chitty, C. & Dunford, J., *State Schools: New Labour and the Conservative Legacy*, London: Woburn Press 1999, p12

rather than a reformed curriculum. What the Conservatives had hoped to end, they unintentionally spread. This was starkly apparent in the case of reading:

‘... the first version of the National Curriculum for English [1989] seemed to be clearly influenced by the orthodoxy of the late 1980s. In a document of 43 pages, phonics was only mentioned once.’²⁰

The perverse consequence of this is that teachers, who before had greater freedom to teach reading as they thought appropriate, many of whom might have defied academic fashions to make significant use of phonics, now felt inhibited from doing so. Ofsted found that ‘...phonics was often taught surreptitiously because teachers felt that their approach to teaching reading lacked official approval: teaching phonics was certainly not the norm’.²¹ So whilst Labour is frequently blamed for eradicating a focus on phonics, and indeed it must take much of the responsibility, it was actually Labour that first put phonics explicitly back on the education agenda.

The National Literacy Strategy: all things to all people

‘In the UK... too many policies have been imposed on schools without adequate evidence about their likely effects and costs. It is arguably a waste of public money and professionals’ time to impose policies without good evidence that they will lead to an improvement over what previously existed’.

Dr. Robert Coe, Durham University²²

The Conservatives continued to pursue a managerialist policy, and put in motion the idea of a centrally controlled national literacy strategy by piloting a structured ‘literacy hour’ in 1995. The Labour Party, however, whilst in opposition, set up their own Literacy Taskforce in May 1996 and would ultimately be the party to realise a nationwide school literacy scheme. The taskforce produced a ‘consistent strategy’ for elevating standards of literacy, the National Literacy Strategy.²³ The main elements of the National Literacy Strategy, in its original form, were as follows:

- A national target: 80 per cent of primary school leavers were to reach the expected standard, Level 4.
- A Framework for Teaching: this consisted of two main components: a) a schedule of termly teaching objectives; and b) a time and class management structure for the daily Literacy Hour.
- An in-school training programme for teachers referred to as ‘professional development’.²⁴

²⁰ Beard, R., ‘Not the whole story of the National Literacy Strategy – a response to Dominic Wyse’, *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol.29, No.6, December 2003, p921

²¹ Ofsted, 2001, p2 quoted in Beard, R., ‘Not the whole story of the National Literacy Strategy – a response to Dominic Wyse’, p921

²² Coe R., ‘A Manifesto for Evidence Based Education,’ 1999, introduction

²³ Beard, R., ‘Research and the National Literacy Strategy’, *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 26, Nos. 3 & 4, 2000, p421

²⁴ Adapted from Beard, R., ‘Research and the National Literacy Strategy’, p422

The most important aspect of the National Literacy Strategy was the framework for teaching that detailed teaching objectives from Reception Year to Year 6 and the way in which the Literacy Hour should be taught.²⁵ For reading, this meant employing what was termed the ‘searchlights’ model. This was an ambitious policy shift and one that made visible efforts to incorporate structured teaching methods to roll out across primary schools. However, in order to accommodate the more established academic orthodoxy (i.e. child-centred rather than anything resembling didactic or mechanistic teaching), a medley of reading strategies was included in searchlights. This attempt to keep everyone happy, while also attempting to address reading standards, led to a rather chaotic model which would frequently prove ineffective. Searchlights encouraged children to learn to read using four distinctive methods *simultaneously*.²⁶

- Phonic (sound and spelling)
- Knowledge of context
- Grammatical knowledge
- Word recognition and graphic knowledge

The additional emphasis on phonics demonstrated a commitment to giving children a phonetic understanding as a central building block of reading. However, the overall model of searchlights retained a reliance on the use of cues and clues. The danger of this was that rather than building on accumulated skills, many children were kept at a stage of conducting a continuous and unsystematic process of guessing when they should have already been advanced decoders. One of the main weaknesses was the fact that phonics learning was drawn out across several years rather than treated as the foundation.

How was this new strategy enforced? Although it was rolled out across the country, the National Literacy Strategy was not technically compulsory. However, the managerialist structure put in place by the previous government offered plenty of pathways by which to control what was being taught. The new strategy was disseminated through teacher training, in-school teacher training and extensive materials and guidance sent to schools. From September 1998, a national curriculum for teacher training was enforced which ensured that all trainee primary teachers could teach literacy well,²⁷ with ‘well’ translating to mean according to the National Literacy Strategy.

The schools inspectorate, Ofsted, has also acted as enforcer, ensuring that the central tenets of the Literacy Hour were taking place in schools; an irony of this is that Ofsted has also been one of the National Literacy Strategy’s most trenchant critics. In 2002 it undertook an evaluation of the first four years of the National Literacy Strategy (from 1998). What came to the fore in their criticisms was the inappropriate provision of phonics teaching. Their primary criticism was that phonics was not being concentrated on right at the start of learning to read. They considered that this had

²⁵ Wyse, D., ‘The National Literacy Strategy: a critical review of the empirical evidence,’ British Educational Research Journal, Vol. 29, No. 6, December 2003

²⁶ National Literacy Strategy Framework for teaching, DfES
http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/literacy/nls_framework/484723/918907

²⁷ Brooks, G., ‘Sound Sense: the Phonics Elements of the National Literacy Strategy: a report to the department for education and skills’, University of Sheffield, July 2003

happened because of weaknesses in the guidance given to teachers on the searchlights model:

‘...the searchlights model... has not been effective enough in terms of illustrating where the intensity of the “searchlights” should fall at the different stages of learning to read... beginning readers need to learn how to decode effortlessly using their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and the skills of blending sounds together. The result has been an approach which defuses teaching at the earliest stages, rather than concentrating it on phonics.’²⁸

Instead ‘...teachers in Year R [reception year] and Key Stage 1 feel compelled to teach all types of word-level objectives in the first 15 minutes, not simply phonics. This reduces the potential effectiveness... of the hour.’ What Ofsted recommended was the teaching of phonic knowledge and skills ‘systematically and speedily’ from Year R.²⁹

In response to this the National Literacy Strategy team argued that ‘... the major challenge in improving the quality of phonics teaching under the auspices of the National Literacy Strategy relates more to the implementation of the Strategy than to its design’.³⁰ In other words, their position was that teachers had misinterpreted the emphasis to be placed on phonics. It is clear from how, in practice, the searchlights model was implemented in schools that, whatever the team’s intentions, the National Literacy Strategy teaching framework was not explicit. As Greg Brooks of the University of Sheffield has argued, the searchlights model is open to misinterpretation with the four elements having been interpreted both by schools *and* teacher training institutions as having ‘equal prominence’.³¹

It was not until the Education and Skills Select Committee launched an independent inquiry into the teaching of reading in primary schools that Ofsted’s criticisms of the National Literacy Strategy were fully addressed (a long three years after they were initially highlighted). Former Chief Inspector, Jim Rose, who carried out the independent inquiry, concluded that the teaching of phonics in the first stage of learning to read should be ‘first and fast’. The government National Literacy Strategy team’s response to this has been to put phonics at the heart of the first steps of reading.

Could systematic synthetic phonics be the solution to our achievement gap?

‘Of all the things you can learn at school, reading matters most.’
Economic and Social Research Council, *Society Today*, 2006³²

²⁸ Ofsted (2002), ‘The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years 1998-2002’, London

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ ‘Teaching Phonics in the National Literacy Strategy’, DfES, National Literacy Strategy, February 2003

³¹ Brooks, G., ‘Sound Sense: the Phonics Elements of the National Literacy Strategy: a report to the department for education and skills’, University of Sheffield, July 2003, p21

³² http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/CP/Our_Society_Today/Spotlights_2006/phonics.aspx?ComponentId=16232&SourcePageId=13440

Our contention is that the efforts to close the achievement gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged have, until now, lacked a key ingredient: an early and systematic foundation in synthetic phonics.

Our reasons for stating this are as follows:

- We already have many successful young readers in England as evidenced, for example, in England's performance in the international study, PIRLS in 2001 (in which England was ranked third in the world for reading).³³
- As research by the Sutton Trust indicates, the strongest predictor of a child's educational attainment is currently their parents' education and experience.³⁴ This suggests that state education is not influencing children's life chances sufficiently.
- We know that systematic synthetic phonics can be particularly useful for levelling the playing field between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. The most prominent example is the seven-year Scottish Clackmannanshire trials where a cohort of children from 19 primary schools was taught to read with a synthetic phonics programme. * From Primary 1, our Reception Year equivalent, 300 children spent 20 minutes a day learning the synthetic phonics method. By the end of primary school, the reading age of the children in the study was on average three and a half years ahead of their actual age. Crucially, the gap between children of different backgrounds was virtually eradicated.³⁵

From these premises, we can extrapolate that a key differentiating feature between children from contrasting backgrounds is whether a 'reading readiness' has been instilled at home. This reading readiness refers to a familiarisation with books and, crucially, an awareness of correspondence between letters and sounds. This might take the form of informal teaching when parents read or talk to their children or more formal pre-school activities involving letter-sound matching. Irrespective of the specific causes in individual cases, teaching synthetic phonics systematically at the start of their formal reading career allows this letter-sound toolkit to be instilled in *all* children.

Essentially, the best gauge of government education is the learning level of those from disadvantaged backgrounds because their learning is highly dependent on what state schools have to offer. Thus a now historical correlation between disadvantaged background and poor reading (which also connects poor reading to crime and social exclusion) indicates that state literacy policy has been weak. A shift in policy, however, towards synthetic phonics should enable disadvantaged children to gain most of the benefits previously the preserve of those with the pre-school advantage.

The potential of synthetic phonics extends also to those pupils for whom formal reading does not begin this week. The experience of the Civitas Supplementary

³³ PIRLS 2001 International Report http://timss.bc.edu/pirls2001/PIRLS2001_Pubs_IR.html

³⁴ *Guardian*, 26th July, 2005, 'Kelly launches literacy drive'

³⁵ R.S. Johnston and J.E. Watson, 'A Seven Year Study of the Effects of Synthetic Phonics Teaching on Reading and Spelling Attainment', Scottish Executive Education Department, 2005

Schools project suggests that older children can also benefit enormously from concentrated programmes of synthetic phonics. For two years, the Civitas Supplementary Schools project has tried to cater for pupils in disadvantaged areas. In this year's summer school pupils' reading ages were boosted (measured using the Holborn Reading Scale) on average by 1 year and 9 months in 2 concentrated weeks. The progress made by the pupils was so striking that the Project has decided to make the course textbook, Irina Tyk's *The Butterfly Book*, available for the first time in a commercial format.

A final word of caution

It would be easy to simplify the conclusion of this report by stating that the government's move to make synthetic phonics central to the primary school curriculum represents a vindication of structured lessons over what has been termed 'progressive', child-centred learning.

However, the demonstrable benefits of re-emphasising synthetic phonics can be undermined by the pernicious nature of centralised control over what happens in the classroom. We have already witnessed through the National Literacy Strategy that, even though technically non-compulsory, government 'guidelines' translate in practice into diktat, enforced through Ofsted, LEAs and teacher training.* Little wonder that the government's 'first and fast' synthetic phonics in schools has been reported almost universally as constituting 'a legal requirement'.³⁶ Although the notion that 'the gentleman in Whitehall knows best' seems hopelessly archaic today, it is thriving at the heart of government education policy.

Where has our gentleman in Whitehall taken education up until now? First, he spent a generation entrusting school policy to an unaccountable and experimental academic establishment blinded by political agendas. Then, he spent two decades attempting to claim it back. He did so only by expanding the size and powers of central government departments and constructing an elaborate and expensive network of quangos that have absorbed many resources targeted at education. These control teacher training and direct policy down to minute details in the classroom. Managerialist-inspired 'targets' were meant to make both this system and schools themselves accountable. But the combination of poor policies forced on teachers, as well as targets to demonstrate their effectiveness, has created perverse incentives, in many cases to leave learning behind altogether and to pursue performance in a narrowly defined and centrally validated way. This process appears to have been driven less by party politics than by the business of politics itself.

With this in mind, it may appear that this policy machinery is finally steering schools towards improving reading standards. We have, however, seen this mechanism fail in previous incarnations of the National Literacy Strategy. Any blanket directive issued centrally is likely to fail because it eradicates context and difference. This all too often produces unintended consequences which may well undo the benefits contained even

* The New Labour government has acknowledged the side-effects of over-prescription with an attempt in 2006 to scale down the guidance for the Literacy Hour and make it more 'flexible'. Nevertheless, room for manoeuvre continues to be limited.

³⁶ For example: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/primaryeducation/story/0,,1735859,00.html>; <http://education.independent.co.uk/schools/article352916.ece>

in strategies proven effective through research and piloting. The far more effective way government can influence teacher behaviour is not by dictation but by providing evidence of what works. What we need is evidence-based policy rather than coercion-based policy.

* The researchers in this study, Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson, also looked at the comparative effectiveness of synthetic and analytic phonics. They found that those children who were taught to read using the synthetic phonics approach were, after 16 weeks of instruction, at least seven months ahead of those children taught using the analytic approach (University of Hull, Press Release, 3rd June 2005) <http://www.hull.ac.uk/05/pdf/aboutus/news/June/index.pdf>