

Dear Michael...

With the new primary curriculum shelved and the coalition government yet to move on the teaching of reading we asked two key figures in the literacy debate to pen a letter to Michael Gove with some helpful suggestions. This is what they had to say



Debbie Hepplewhite

Politics has entered a new era since the general election with its resulting coalition government. There is both excitement and trepidation in the air. We note the positive rhetoric about greater political transparency and choices/responsibility/power being literally returned to the people. The coalition government suggests that this will be accomplished through a radical reduction in bureaucracy and quangoism and, on a micro level, through devolution, with greater involvement of local communities making local decisions. I, like many others I have spoken with, am filled with optimism and hope that such change will be addressed wisely.

Others are more cynical and fearful

– understandably so – as facing up to the country's financial plight looks set to impinge on those most dependent on the state, the very institution which may well cut back on its interference also says it has to cut back on its public services. Time will tell whether the coalition government is able to manage this in a sensitive and humanitarian way so that vulnerable people are properly supported and empowered to improve their circumstances – enabling them to break out of the poverty trap and to succeed educationally.

Supporting literacy

We all acknowledge that teaching children to read, spell and write competently is fundamentally important. Becoming fully literate has long been recognised as underpinning personal esteem and achievement in education generally – and is hailed as being an essential component of 'economic wellbeing'.

I am writing here from an educationalist's perspective, particularly regarding how we can most strongly support the teaching of synthetic phonics for reading, spelling and writing in our schools. Throughout the last decade of challenging the previous government's 'multi-cueing' guidance for teaching reading, individual politicians from all the main parties listened seriously to the

arguments. They approached successive secretaries of state for education and asked questions in the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Research on reading was taken into consideration, including the conclusions of national inquiries in America and Australia. Leading-edge practice in the UK was scrutinised and helped to inform Jim Rose's independent review of how best to teach reading (*Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading*, Rose, 2006). These factors and events led to the previous government's apparent acceptance of Rose's recommendations and the production of *Letters and Sounds*. For several years, events have been significantly driven forwards personally by Nick Gibb MP, now the minister for schools.

Reading Recovery

I say 'apparent acceptance' of the synthetic phonics teaching principles for this reason: the whole language Reading Recovery intervention programme was simultaneously promoted by KPMG alongside the previous government under the Every Child a Reader umbrella. The National Primary Strategies' managers issued instructions to local authorities that Reading Recovery must be employed both for intervention purposes for six year olds *and* for 'influencing' teaching throughout the schools involved. To date,



no satisfactory answer has been provided regarding this contradictory state of affairs, which clearly undermines Rose's recommendations and the introduction of the synthetic phonics teaching principles as the most effective method to teach reading (whether for Quality First, Wave 2, or Wave 3 teaching).

What effect must this promotion of Reading Recovery have had on teaching staff in at least those schools where Reading Recovery teachers are employed? What message does this give to teacher trainers in our universities when whole-language programmes still appear to be acceptable despite multiple high-level investigations? In a parliamentary inquiry last year, even the science and technology committee challenged the government's promotion of Reading Recovery and drew attention to its whole language methodology and the government's contradictory policy. With Reading Recovery entrenched under the auspices of the Institute of Education and established historically across the world, will the coalition government have the will and wherewithal to sort out this political and educational impasse?

Synthetic phonics

I have long since realised that many people argue against synthetic phonics teaching because, the truth is, they don't really

know what it entails and how effective it is. They certainly cannot have taught real children with a good, systematic and modern synthetic phonics teaching programme or they simply wouldn't argue against the synthetic phonics teaching principles! I found evidence of this recently when I was following some internet leads – the introductory blurb to the reading instruction course for student teachers at a university included a description of why synthetic phonics could not work, with our English language described as 'irregular' and the example given was that the words 'fast' and 'blast' were not decodable. And that says it all!

Furthermore, the previous government's publication *Letters and Sounds* has been presented to schools as if it is a full 'programme' when it certainly is not. It is detailed guidance which, if used as a 'programme', entails a massive amount of both teaching and learning resource preparation, the invention of a complete mnemonic system, and masses of time spent adding to its bare bones to turn it into something resembling a full and rigorous programme.

Moving forwards

So in summary, I would like to congratulate the efforts made by your party to make evidence-based synthetic phonics reading instruction your flagship

policy and, in particular, I would like to thank Nick Gibb, the minister for schools, for his outstanding commitment to the review of reading instruction and his consequent promotion of the need for synthetic phonics teaching. I commend the public commitment of both the schools minister and yourself to put the attainment of literacy for everyone as your highest priority.

These are the suggestions I would like to put forward to support the achievement of our common goals quickly and for the highest outcomes:

- Present the government publication *Letters and Sounds* as detailed guidance rather than suggest it is a full programme.
- Take steps to ensure that all initial teacher trainers, Ofsted inspectors, local authority advisers and the teaching profession itself are conversant with the letter/s-sound correspondences of a comprehensively structured alphabetic code and the processes involved with the teaching of the three core skills of blending, segmenting and handwriting. Further, ensure that all of these professionals fully understand the need to evaluate and compare what teaching programmes include to support the teaching and learning processes effectively and appropriately. (Thus, *Letters and Sounds* would not be presented as the core teacher training

document, as it may depress the best results possible, nor should it be put forward as a suitable programme for Key Stages 2, 3 and adult intervention.)

- Acknowledge and challenge the previous government's unsound commitment to fund and promote Reading Recovery, rather than continuing to finance it for the academic year 2011-12, as it is not in line with the accepted recommendations of Jim Rose's final report, nor in line with the prevailing research and leading-edge practice. Confirm for teachers exactly which methods of reading instruction you advise they use based on the prevailing body of international evidence.

- Introduce a fourth competency skills test in synthetic phonics for all student teachers in the primary phase, alongside literacy, numeracy and ICT. This competency test could consist of two parts, much like a driving test, part theory and part practical and both parts would need to be passed to achieve QTS. The training could involve magnet (specialist) synthetic phonics schools to facilitate the practical part of the competency test and these schools would need to be accredited to avoid poor practice. This idea is currently being developed by Lesley Drake and Jim Curran with the Reading Reform Foundation,

- Ofsted inspections should always involve scrutiny of reading and spelling instruction and mention the methodology of the school and the quality of provision and results.

- Primary schools should make clear the level of alphabetic code (the letter/s-sound correspondences) they are accountable for teaching within the school as part of their literacy policies.

- The Early Years Foundation Stage should become guidance only with a complete re-think as to any assessment and evidence considered necessary for national record-keeping (for example, for the Foundation Stage Profiles). Completely reassess the nature of local authority inspection and work hard to change the teaching climate so that early years teachers and carers feel genuinely supported and inspired rather than constantly watched and judged.

- Urgently establish an official system of 'upwards evaluation' for the teaching profession so that teachers and other

personnel can readily report back on their findings on any guidance/directions, and the competence, and quality of relationships, of senior managers and others in authority over them. Then issues of accountability can be, rightly, a two-way process.

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John Coe

I am going to question the current view concerning the state of reading in our schools. We can and must do better but at the present time both teachers and children are wrestling with the wrong targets, resources are being wasted and standards of achievement are harmed.

See the success

What do you think about reading? Failure is the word that comes too readily to mind. Last October you said, 'The fact that 100,000 children leave primary school unable to read properly is the biggest failure of the education system.' You drew this figure from the proportion of the age group, about a seventh, who do not reach Level 4 in reading before they leave primary school. Surely you don't think of reading as a skill that should be mastered in the early years of schooling and then that's it? I remind you of Goethe, who at the age of 80 remarked that he had been learning to read all his life. Your statement shows acceptance of the previous government's assertion that

Level 4 is the expected level. A political expectation, perhaps, but not one shared by most parents and teachers, who know that Level 4 is pitched to the average child, the mid point between the most and least able. A more reliable guide to how well primary children are learning is Level 3. Ninety-five per cent reach that level, indicated by the rubric as:

Pupils read a range of texts fluently and accurately. They read independently, using strategies appropriately to establish meaning. In responding to fiction and non-fiction they show understanding of the main points and express preferences.

A good launching pad for the development of reading in secondary school, wouldn't you say? Considering the increasing number of primary school pupils who do not speak English at home this is a decided achievement and the climate surrounding primary reading should be one not of failure but of success. Ask any teacher to name the first ingredient in the mix which prompts success in education and you will be told that recognising success is the first step to gaining more. Secretary of state, you can improve things just by rejecting the mindset of failure so assiduously promoted by your predecessors. An inappropriate target was put before teachers who then faced failure however well they taught.

Lower achievers

I know that by arguing for primary success I have raised a question concerning poor achievement in children's later years. Consider the 'failing' 5% of primary pupils. Nearly 40,000 children, and each one concerns us. The word failing is seldom justified because a high proportion of these children have special needs or multiple special needs. This most certainly does not mean that they cannot learn, but they learn more slowly. What is needed is patient one-to-one tuition using approaches matched to the special child's individual needs. This is expensive, but the success rate is high. Eighty per cent of such children make real progress.

A cure for all ills?

What about synthetic phonics as a method of introducing children to decoding (which is far from being the true nature of reading)? The synthetic approach is presented to you as a panacea to cure

all reading ills. Well, it's useful but far from a panacea. Studies have shown the superiority of a balanced approach, concerned not only with decoding but most importantly with meaning as well. It is the quality of the teacher and the use of engaging texts that make more of a difference. Most schools include phonics in such an approach. The Clackmannanshire study of which so much is made was deficient in research terms and not conclusive enough to warrant wholesale adoption of synthetic phonics. Only a small group of teachers were involved and the 177 children assessed were ahead only in tests requiring them to pronounce words presented in lists. Tests of comprehension, the real indicator of skill as a reader, showed that the children were only three months ahead of national norms. This was after heavy investment in reading. Some £20m was devoted to raising attainment and there was strong emphasis upon professional development.

At present, the case for the early teaching of synthetic phonics is unproven. More definitive research is required. This should include matched groups of teachers and allow for possibly large between-teacher effects. And, of course, the research should be peer reviewed. Practitioners will take little notice if all they have is advocacy by enthusiasts who too often come across as disturbingly swivel eyed. Needless to say the research must allow for the Hawthorne effect, which leads the enthusiastic participation of committed teachers to achieve success irrespective of the teaching method employed. We must remember the example of another panacea many years ago; the initial teaching alphabet promised success for all children, which was confirmed by the first evaluation. Alas, the second more major evaluation, which, unlike the first, allowed for the Hawthorne effect, showed no gains at all in comparison with the use of traditional orthography. There are no panaceas, Mr Gove.

The collapse of achievement

It is later that difficulties and decline in achievement are experienced by too many children, particularly the 5% who enter secondary school with a tenuous grasp of reading. This is a criticism of secondary teaching but also a reflection

of adolescence and the increasing impact of friends and family. The encouragement that is offered to many pupils helps them towards greater success but for the vulnerable, too often this is not the case. In families where there is no reading and where reading skills, if ever gained, have fallen into disuse the youngster learns to get by without literacy.

A Bow Group report in 2007 found that almost a fifth of 14-year-old boys had a reading age of a seven year old – an alarming decline in children, a majority of whom were able to read fluently and accurately three years earlier. This decline during the examination-dominated secondary years has a major impact on the national economy. Investors in People have estimated that low standards are costing £4.8bn per year. Poor readers are much more likely to be unemployed, they are more likely to commit a crime and to be sent to prison; they are more likely to suffer from depression and to be isolated within their community.

The global picture

It is even more worrying when we consider the true nature of reading, which is concerned with comprehension rather than merely with decoding. The most recent PISA study from the OECD showed that 15 year olds in England dropped from seventh place in reading in 2000 to 17th in 2006. The Progress In International Reading Literacy Study shows a similar decline among older pupils; the UK had the third best literacy rate in 2001 but fell to 15th in 2006. An analysis of the latter study reveals that the range of UK attainment was the widest in the developed world and that the tail of low attainment had failed to be compensated for by our able pupils in the 95th percentile, who scored higher than comparable pupils in all other participating countries. Furthermore, our children scored poorly on attitude; we had the highest proportion who expressed clearly negative views about reading. This results from our concentration upon decoding rather than on understanding which leads to pleasure and satisfaction in reading. Understandably our leading children's authors have united against teaching reading through culled extracts rather than through the use of the books themselves.

Creating continuity in literacy

So what should be done Mr Gove?

For the beginning to a solution you have first to acknowledge that the problem is centred on secondary schools. The great majority of pupils aged 11 leave their schools having made a sound start to reading, but of course more can be done. The previous government's emphasis on decoding has been at the expense of the human attributes that go towards making a reader. Without the expectations and assumptions of a reader, if reading is not embedded in the children's very being, then in adolescence and beyond the skill achieved in primary school will atrophy and for some, who lack the stimulus and example provided by families and friends, it will die altogether.

Dismiss from your mind the myth created in the past that there is some sort of crisis in the teaching of beginning readers. There isn't – our primary pupils are up there with the best in the world. Your recognition of this fact will do much to create a culture of success, which is the best way of encouraging further improvement.

Target the one in 20 who struggle. Provide them with one-to-one tuition.

Ask your inspectors to seek out and disseminate teaching which carries the reward of the skill itself. I do not mean spectacular teachers performing in front of children shouting out the match between graphemes and phonemes. This may be a jolly time but is of little importance when it comes to growing readers who will stay wanting to read and using reading in their later life.

Turn your attention to the teaching of reading in secondary schools. It is a warning sign that only the 12 year olds are encouraged to read for personal enjoyment. Request a review of how reading is studied as an important element of secondary PGCE courses. Remember, every teacher of every secondary subject is a teacher of reading. Are they trained to do this or do examination results so dominate school life that the most vital skill for both individuals and society is neglected?

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