

So why can't they read?

MIRIAM GROSS

FOREWORD BY BORIS JOHNSON



THE AUTHOR

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FOREWORD

It is perhaps the single most shattering indictment of our educational system that in London – the motor of the UK economy – there are a million adults who cannot read. That is to say, they lack the basic ability to look something up on the web or the Yellow Pages.

One in six working Londoners is functionally illiterate. That is before we have even considered the plight of the unemployed. We are talking about an epidemic of illiteracy, and a serious cause of economic underperformance. But it is worse than that.

Each individual case of illiteracy can be a personal disaster – a source of embarrassment, shame and low self-esteem. People who cannot read or write are excluded from so many of the pleasures and opportunities that are open to everyone else. It is no wonder that they are more likely to become disillusioned and alienated and to turn to crime.

We need urgently to chase down the causes of this slow-motion disaster, and all the evidence suggests that we have to go right back to primary school, and the 25 per cent who are leaving, at the age of 11, unable properly to read or write.

Miriam Gross has performed a valuable public service, in talking to teachers, parents and educational theorists about the roots of the problem; and she has exploded at least one myth about literacy in London. This is a city of 300 languages, a patchwork of communities and cultures – and yet she has found schools where immigrant children are being taught to read with beautiful fluency and precision.

It is not a question of where your family come from. It's a question of how you are taught, and whether you are properly motivated to learn. I know that many teachers will disagree with some of her conclusions, and many will dissent from her vehement endorsement of synthetic phonics as opposed to whole word recognition or the mixture of methods advocated in the old National Literacy Strategy.

This is a controversy that has been raging for so long, and with such theological intensity, that it is surely time to resolve it once and for all. If, as the Centre for Policy Studies suggests, an annual competition can be devised to discover which schools are best at teaching children how to read – with adequate controls – then I would certainly give the venture my full support.

But whatever the teaching system you use, the key thing surely is that we focus on reading. We spend billions on “skills”, with much of that funding in fact going on remedial English teaching for young adults who have never properly learned to read. Of all the “skills” on the “skills agenda”, reading is the indispensable prerequisite. That is why we in City Hall are championing a range of literacy programmes through the Mayor's Fund for London. I was also delighted when Nomura Bank agreed to a three year sponsorship of the Civitas supplementary school programme, which involves a phonics-based approach.

We need much more of such teaching, because the astonishing levels of illiteracy are not only an indictment of our failures in the last 20 years; they are an indication of potential. Imagine if we could so focus on the five, six and seven year olds that hardly any 11 year olds were having difficulty.

Think of the difference we could make to the economy and society. London has an extraordinary future over the next few years, with a young and growing population, the Olympic investments, major transport improvements and a real chance of lengthening our lead as the financial and cultural capital of the world. But if everyone is to share in that success, they must first learn to read.

Boris Johnson
Mayor of London
July 2010

1. ALARMING FIGURES

Not being able to read or write is one of the greatest deprivations a young person can suffer. It leads to frustration and misery. It is a major cause of unemployment and criminality.

Over a third of all children who leave London's state primary schools at the age of 11 still have difficulties with reading (even though they have passed national tests) and about 5% can hardly read at all. About 20% of pupils leave secondary schools without being able to read or write with confidence.

"It's alarming how many children can't read properly at the age of 14 and 15," a young graduate who is working as a teaching assistant at a girls secondary school in North Kensington in west London told me. "Some of the children do a good job of pretending they can read, but they don't know all the letters and sounds. Many of them have sort of given up."

Last year this teaching assistant helped out at a primary school in White City: "Reading was taught in a very unsystematic way. Most of the time it was practised but not actually taught." At both schools, he added, "most of the kids I've worked with absolutely hate reading."

To understand how this tragic situation has come about one needs to look at the underlying attitudes and beliefs which have dominated state education for the past 50 years – and which to some extent continue to do so.

In the name of progress

Since the 1960s, when the “progressive education” movement pioneered in America was embraced by the British school system, the first years of school have been seen mainly as a time for play, creativity and self expression. Requiring children to memorise facts and figures has come to be regarded, not as enlarging a child’s world, but as stifling his or her imagination.

Teachers have been encouraged to act as “facilitators”, whose task is to give young children the opportunity to find things out for themselves. Indeed the very idea of teaching – that one person who knows more than another should pass on that knowledge – has been widely seen as oppressive.

Whole-class teaching in primary schools, where the teacher demands the attention of every pupil, has given way to a much more casual approach. The class usually sits on the floor in front of the teacher for part of the lesson and is then divided into groups which are expected to get on with their own tasks. Spontaneity and informality have taken priority over order and discipline in the classroom.

The belief that equality, not just equality of opportunity but equality of outcome, is an achievable moral good has also been an important aspect of the prevailing orthodoxy. Mixed ability teaching has been thought to be more equitable than separating pupils according to ability, and likely to lead to better social adjustment and less damage to the self esteem of

slow learners. “Selection” has been a dirty word. Competition within the class has been discouraged.

Parents in the 1970s and 1980s were often advised by teachers not to help their children with reading. A father of a six-year old at a London primary school recalls how astounded he was to be rebuked by a teacher because his son was trying to do joined-up writing before his class-mates. The charge was “over-achieving”.

The consequences of this ideology have been dire. Government reports and academic studies over the past 30 years have pointed to a decline in the standards of literacy and numeracy both in primary and secondary schools. National exams have been made easier to match lower levels of achievement. Mixed ability teaching has not fulfilled the expectations of its advocates. Disruptive and violent behaviour has become a regular feature of many classrooms. Teachers have been reluctant to assert even such powers as they have for fear of precipitating complaints from children and their parents – and running the risk of dismissal.

Meanwhile the gap between the academic standards of independent schools – which have by and large stuck with traditional teaching – and those of state schools has widened.

Improvements

All this is gradually becoming recognised. Many schools – mainly secondary but also some primary – have in recent years reverted to more structured regimes and a more rigorous approach to teaching.

Elmhurst School in Newham, for example, one of the largest and most successful primary schools in London, has abandoned many tenets of the “do it yourself” approach to learning. “Creativity is built on the fundamental skills of literacy and

numeracy, not the other way round”, its headteacher, Shahed Ahmed, said to me, “without strong foundations, children’s future potential withers quickly.”

The Sir William Burroughs primary school in Tower Hamlets has also been transformed by its intrepid headteacher, Avril Newman. To general outrage, as she told me, she insisted on introducing systematic and rigorous teaching methods throughout the curriculum when she took over the school ten years ago. Many of her staff left at the time and she was able to recruit like-minded teachers. Last year, 100% of the school’s pupils were achieving above national average literacy results.

Some of the new Academy schools in London, such as Mossbourne in Hackney, have imposed much greater discipline on their pupils, both inside and outside the classroom. Children are firmly assigned to sets according to ability in all subjects. There are strict rules of behaviour throughout the school: pupils are not allowed to talk to each other in the corridors while walking from one classroom to another; mobile phones are proscribed, as is chewing gum.

At the Capital City Academy in Brent there is a determined focus on learning and discipline. “The quality of teaching and the understanding of how youngsters learn are immeasurably higher than they were 20 years ago”, says Alex Thomas, its headteacher, “schools are much more structured and there is no longer any lack of support for authority. Truancy is recorded, which was not the case in the past”. Visiting this large school, I was struck by its scholarly atmosphere.

Child-led education

Yet despite these improvements, the “child-led” or “child-centred” approach to teaching persists in many primary schools and in the mindset of many teachers, including headteachers.

“Primary schools in London are often chaotic”, one experienced teacher told me, “the children have too much time to play. They get bored and start misbehaving. There aren’t many rules and those that exist aren’t enforced. For example, because the children aren’t formed in a line while entering a classroom, it takes about 15 minutes for them to settle down before a lesson can start. That alone wastes a lot of time each day. There’s very little repetition to make sure that what’s been taught has sunk in. Mixed ability teaching means that many of the children mess around while the teacher attends to one child, or one group. In other words, not enough teaching and not enough learning.”

There is still a widespread assumption that being creative and getting things right are incompatible. This attitude is reflected in a remark made by the headmistress of a Church of England primary school:

“It’s so important not to crush the children’s creativity when they write down a story. It would undermine their confidence if we pointed out mistakes.”

But, as a teacher with a very different ethos insists:

“I believe that it is the moral and scholarly duty of every teacher to correct, with appropriate sensitivity, any child who does anything incorrectly. When a three-year-old picks up a paint brush

incorrectly, his or her creativity will not be compromised if he is taught to hold it correctly.”

The idea that pointing out mistakes is somehow detrimental to students’ progress obtains even in tests and exams. At GCSE level, many papers – in history and geography for example – are assessed entirely on the basis of content, with no marks taken off for bad sentence structure, incorrect grammar, poor spelling or faulty punctuation. As a young history teacher at a secondary school remarked:

“If writing correctly were taken into account right across the syllabus and not just in English, students at all levels would learn to write better.”

Anecdotal evidence from employers and universities suggests that the proportion of school leavers who can’t form sentences coherently is alarmingly high.

A Confederation of British Industry report earlier this year found that 22% of employers who hired school leavers were obliged to give them remedial training in literacy. Universities now routinely give basic writing courses to first-year undergraduates. The head of British Telecom has recently complained that a quarter of the 26,000 applicants for a BT apprenticeship programme “lacked the basic skills needed to get by in the workplace.”

The quality of teaching

Unfortunately many teachers, themselves victims of a poor state education, have a weak grasp of spelling and syntax. A teaching assistant at a large London primary school tells me that she has on a number of occasions observed teachers writing wrongly spelled words and grammatically incorrect sentences on the board. She is too polite – or too timid – to point this out.

Indeed the problem of inadequate teachers remains unsolved. Their number may be smaller than in the 1990s, when Chris Woodhead, then Chief Inspector of Schools, claimed that 15,000 of the nation's teachers were incompetent. But even the current Inspector's verdict – "a stubborn core of inadequate teaching" – is dismaying. Sacking teachers is both very difficult and regarded within schools as excessively harsh.

Ineffectual teachers can extinguish the enthusiasm and destroy the potential of generations of eager learners.

Paperwork

Meanwhile, some recent developments threaten to undermine such progress as is being made. For example, teachers are now obliged to make continuous written assessments of each child's progress in all subjects. The National Curriculum's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), for example, which became mandatory for all schools in 2008, requires that:

"Each child's development should be recorded against 13 assessment scales, based on the early learning goals and divided between the six areas of learning and development. Judgements against these scales should be made from observation of consistent and independent behaviour, predominantly from children's self-initiated activities."

The result is endless paperwork, about which teachers bitterly complain:

"We spend a great deal of time assessing every stage of every single child's development – there's not much time left over for teaching. We have to

rely on teaching assistants and trainee teachers to look after the children.”

At the same time teachers are bombarded by constant government directives and guidelines telling them how and what to teach. And they are under continuous pressure to meet government targets. All this leaves very little scope or time for exercising their own initiative.

“I have spent hours and hours in the past few years churning out masses and masses of reports to show that I have covered this and that activity”, a headteacher of an independent primary school confided, “it’s all a complete waste of time. But it’s a legal requirement monitored by Ofsted, so I’ve got to do it.”

Emotional wellbeing

Another recent trend which diverts teachers from what should be their main task is a by-product of the “learning through self-discovery” ethos. It involves the introduction into the primary school curriculum of an increasing number of topics and projects which are intended to enhance children’s “personal and social skills” and to boost their self-esteem.

PSHE (Personal Social and Health Education) classes are now mandatory for all five to eleven year-olds. They include “Circle Time” where the children’s relationships, their home lives and their families are discussed. This may sometimes be beneficial, but it is out of control: a psychological and personal slant now permeates nearly all primary school lessons, often quite inappropriately.

One of the objectives of the PSHE classes, for example, according to the Department for Education, is that primary-age children should, “be preparing for puberty and being able to talk about feelings and friendships”.

Numerous publicly-funded organisations, consultants and charities have sprung up in recent years to provide schools with courses in emotional well-being and relationship skills.

Irina Tyk, the headteacher of one of the most highly-rated preparatory schools in London, Holland House, who is critical of all this “psychologising”, is dismayed that Ofsted inspectors are more concerned with social issues than with learning:

“One Inspector complained to me last year that my little five and six year-olds didn’t seem to be aware of their cultural background or what their race is. ‘How wonderful’, I replied. ‘Why should five-years old be thinking about background and race?’ ”

Avril Newman at Sir William Burroughs school ignores the government directives:

“We don’t waste time with PSHE – there’s no Circle Time in this school. We don’t go in for delving into motives.”

The great majority of children, at any rate under the age of eight or nine, are neither ready for nor interested in discussions about emotions, backgrounds, and relationships.

A trainee-teacher, sitting in on a Year One (six to seven year-olds) class on the subject of sibling rivalry, observed, “the children seemed too young to understand what it all was about. They didn’t take anything away from this lesson”. Teaching this

kind of material, he observed, was probably more interesting for the teachers than for the children.

Meanwhile primary schools that don't succeed in teaching children to master the basic skills damage irreparably the very things they are so intent on promoting – self esteem and emotional well-being.

2. THE READING WARS

How best to teach children to read, write and spell has been the subject of fierce controversy in this country ever since the 1960s, roughly from the time that state schools became comprehensive. On the one side are the supporters of the traditional method, whereby you match and combine individual letters and sounds – technically known as phonics. This way of learning to read is also referred to in educational circles as decoding.

On the other side are the champions of “whole word recognition”: you don’t separate words into their component parts, you learn to recognise and memorize them by looking at their shapes and sizes alongside pictures (“look and say”), or you guess at them from the context in which they appear (“whole word”, “whole language” or “real book”). The devotees of this method don’t exclude phonics altogether – they believe reading should be taught in a variety of ways.

These “reading wars” were already in full swing in America, where the “whole word” method began to be adopted in many schools in the early decades of the 20th century. It was part of the shift to progressive education inspired by the philosopher John Dewey and others.

The dispute reached boiling point in 1955 with the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read*, a vehement attack on the “whole word” theorists who, according to the author Rudolf Flesch, were responsible for the steep decline in literacy in American schools. The book – a plea for a return to the old phonics teaching – became a huge bestseller. (“It seems to me a plain fact that the [whole]word method consists essentially of treating children as if they were dogs”, wrote Flesch.)

The book’s arguments were based on practical experience rather than on academic research, and they were dismissed by most educationalists. It was the psycholinguistic theories being developed at American universities at the time which influenced education policy. According to psycholinguists, reading could best be learnt through “experiences with print” in the same way as a new language can best be learnt by speaking it. Reading was a “psycholinguistic guessing game.” (Rudolf Flesch wrote an equally forceful sequel – *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* – in 1981.)

In England, at that time, nearly all schools were still using phonics, along with old-fashioned, structured teaching methods. “We would all sit at our own desks facing the teacher, 40 in a class”, recalls a former journalist who had attended a large, working class primary school in the early 1950s.

“We would be taught the letters and sounds of the alphabet and how to link them, step by step. It was in an atmosphere of very strong discipline, but we didn't mind that. By the age of 11 nearly all of us could read and write fluently and grammatically. I've recently corresponded with an old schoolmate, a motor mechanic, and I was amazed at the elegance of his writing style.”

But when the tenets of progressive education were adopted by the state system in the 1960s, learning letters and sounds was partially abandoned in favour of more play-based, less structured techniques. Phonics was thought to be too unimaginative, didactic and boring – it prevented children from engaging “meaningfully” with the words they were reading.

In the course of the next 20 years or so the “whole word” and “real book” approaches became the norm in most state primary schools, with the alphabet only playing a supporting role.

Books and reading materials with stronger story-lines were produced to fit the new approach. The process of learning to read was merged with the activity of enjoying and understanding a story. Teacher-training colleges, as well as schools, neglected phonics in their syllabuses.

Decline in standards

The consequences of these changes were not immediately felt. Most children, especially those from stable homes, manage to learn to read in one way or another. Indeed many children from literate families are usually halfway towards reading by the time they start school at the age of five and their progress continues to depend more on home support than on what they learn at school. As one disheartened teacher told me:

“I often thought that children were learning to read and write *despite* rather than because of what we were doing.”

But there is always a substantial minority of children (25% or so) in any year who find reading a struggle. By the end of the 1970s it was becoming apparent to some teachers that, for this group, the “whole word” approach was not working. Nor was it working

for children who came from disadvantaged homes and had parents who did not or could not help them.

Sue Lloyd – who was later to create the Jolly Phonics programme (published by Chris Jolly) now used in countries all over the world – was working at a large primary school at the time.

“Soon after starting at this school, which used the typical ‘look and say’ method, our head of department realised that the children who were poor at reading did not know enough letter-sounds or how to blend them – they couldn’t work out any unfamiliar words. So she decided that, in the first term of school, children should systematically be taught to read through phonics and not by memorising whole words. This change made all the difference and results rapidly improved.”

For many years after this experience, Sue Lloyd tried to convince the people responsible for literacy – both in local authorities and in central government – of the importance of teaching through the alphabetic code. But, as she laments, “they didn’t want to know”. So she gave up on them and concentrated on devising the Jolly Phonics course.

Surveys carried out by the government, and by universities, over the next few years pointed to a marked decline in literacy standards – except in the small number of schools that had stuck to phonics. Evidence was growing that reading was taught much more quickly and effectively in this “old fashioned” way than through other methods.

This came as no surprise to many outside the educational establishment, particularly to parents who were aware how their children were being taught – or not taught. Those who could afford it increasingly sent their children to private schools.

Anxiety in government

The National Curriculum, which formed part of the 1988 Education Act, was introduced by the Conservative Government partly to get a grip on what it saw as the general deterioration in state education. But despite various government measures to help pupils who had fallen behind, the mixed approach to reading – guessing at and memorizing whole words alongside learning letters and sounds – continued to be practised in most schools. Literacy standards did not significantly rise.

By this time, various enterprising teachers were devising courses with the aim of making phonics appealing to children and easy to teach. This systematic, step by step method was now called “synthetic phonics” – a rather off-putting term: you synthesise, ie blend, letters and sounds. The name makes what is the more straightforward process sound the more complex. A better name for it might have been “letters and sounds” (which is what the government later called its own synthetic phonics course).

In 1998 the new Labour Government launched its National Literacy Strategy. Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, who had become a supporter of synthetic phonics, defined it in a speech at an Ofsted conference as “the skilled process of teaching children how the 44 sounds in the English language are represented by a letter or group of letters”.

But the Government decided that the new Strategy should be designed in consultation with all the competing factions in the

reading wars. The Prime Minister did not persuade his Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly of the need for synthetic phonics. (Ed Balls, more recently, was even more doubtful, as were the majority of officials in the Department). As a result compromises were made: several ways of learning to read were, once again, recommended.

The much heralded “literacy hour”, which formed part of this Strategy, was split into four reading-related activities, with only 15 minutes allotted to phonics. Not many teachers, in any case, had been trained to teach phonics systematically. Instead, in the hour specially set aside for learning the basic skill of reading, young children were encouraged to discuss literary – rather than literacy – issues such as plot, narrative style and authorial intentions.

At the same time, as part of the “real book” approach, pupils were given books to take home which included words they could not possibly yet read. They were told to persevere with these books because, eventually, they would learn to recognise the words and then they would enjoy reading. “This had the opposite effect on my son,” a despairing mother reported, “it put him off books altogether”. There is much anecdotal evidence along similar lines.

Not surprisingly, the National Literacy Strategy failed to live up to expectations. Evidence was growing that pupils found a mix of methods (“Searchlights”, as it was called) confusing. “When they start secondary school,” an English teacher told me, “11-year olds often give the appearance of being able to read because they have memorized hundreds of words. But when they come across an unfamiliar word, they’re stymied”.

Synthetic Phonics

Meanwhile several experiments – most famously a seven-year study carried out in Clackmannanshire, Scotland – showed that children who had been taught solely through synthetic phonics were learning to read at a much faster rate than those who had been taught by a range of methods. (Another ten-year study in West Dunbartonshire, Scotland, which was completed in 2007, reached similar conclusions.)

By 2005, the Government was sufficiently worried to commission Jim Rose, formerly Director of Inspections at OFSTED, to conduct an independent review into the teaching of early reading in England.

His report, published in 2006, came down firmly on the side of synthetic phonics. Its wording, though, was often circumspect, leaving room for differing interpretations:

“The findings of this review argue strongly for the inclusion of a vigorous programme of phonics work to be securely embedded within a broad and language-rich curriculum.”

In 2007, the Government issued new guidance, recommending synthetic phonics to all primary schools.

Many teachers, however, found the new emphasis on phonics unpalatable. They objected to yet more government interference and were averse to changing their routines. More importantly, they were still wedded to the child-centred ethos – the word they most often used to describe phonics was “prescriptive”. Their unions, which have generally been hostile to what they see as “authoritarian” styles of teaching, were also antagonistic.

As a result, although primary schools complied with the government's requirement by increasing the amount of time spent on phonics, many of them were not fully committed to it. "Mixed methods" are still widely used.

Anti-phonetic arguments

Many academic educationalists, too, remain convinced that a mixed approach is more effective, and more rewarding, than phonics alone. They put forward a number of arguments to defend this view.

First, they claim that, because the English language, unlike for example Italian or German, does not follow straightforwardly phonetic rules, and because it contains a great many odd and irregular spellings, it cannot be taught purely phonetically.

But as Ruth Miskin, one of the UK's leading experts on literacy (her phonics programme, Read, Write Inc, is now used in numerous primary schools as well as in the "catch up" lessons of secondary schools), points out:

"Of course English is not a simple phonetic language, it's very complex – that's the problem – but it does have a code. It has to be taught step by step, gradually adding the irregularities. English has a million words and you can't teach them all one by one".

Miskin, who was formerly headteacher of a primary school in Tower Hamlets (Kobi Nazrul school), is one of many experienced teachers and literacy experts who are in no doubt that the mixed approach holds children back.

Second, educationalists also maintain that starting to read solely by learning letters and sounds is "mechanical" and

therefore off-putting for children. They should be “reading for sense”. Children, they argue, will not develop a love of reading if phonics is not taught in tandem with comprehension.

This is certainly not borne out by my observation of numerous lessons where synthetic phonics was being taught systematically. Children aged five and six were thoroughly enjoying the process of mastering letters and sounds and they loved blending them into words – even words they didn’t know. Only *after* a word had been decoded, would the teacher explain its meaning. As Ruth Miskin argues:

“Of course, comprehension should be taught throughout the school and of course it is important to read ambitious stories to children, beyond their reading age, but not at the same time as teaching them actually to read.”

For older pupils who have fallen behind, having to focus on phonics may indeed be tedious. But there is no way round this. Jim Rose himself was driven to point out that “unless you can actually decode the words on the page you will not be able, obviously, to comprehend them”.

It hardly needs saying that if you are only semi-literate you will never develop a love of books.

A third argument put forward by whole-word supporters goes like this: because reading is a complex process and because all children are different, reading should be taught in a complex, diversified way.

This point of view gets short shrift from the distinguished authority on literacy, Irina Tyk:

“That is to misunderstand the art of learning and the art of teaching. The skill of hitting a tennis ball with a racket may be very complex, bringing into action ideas in physics, mathematics and biology, but a tennis coach begins at the beginning: he teaches the budding tennis player how to hold the racket, where to place his or her feet and how to hit the ball. Reading should be taught exactly like this.”

Irina Tyk has taught hundreds of children, both in her own school and in classes for disadvantaged children, to read fluently, using her own phonics-based reading and writing course – The Butterfly Book. She does acknowledge that a small number of children with very severe learning difficulties may require “individually tailored reading strategies”.

Avril Newman, the head of Sir William Burroughs primary school, uses a different comparison – that of learning to drive:

“Driving instructors do not vary their instructions according to the differing abilities of the people they teach”.

Lastly, many whole word supporters also believe, in the words of Henrietta Dombey, Emeritus Professor of Literacy in Primary Education at Brighton University, that “the much-trumpeted Clackmannanshire study was deeply flawed”.

Professor Dombey points out that during the course of the seven-year experiment several initiatives – such as leadership training for headteachers, staff development on effective literacy teaching, extra funds to buy more books, and so on – were introduced in the Clackmannanshire schools at which phonics was being taught, but were never mentioned by the study’s authors. She also claims that

the two groups in the experiment were not strictly matched in every respect and she casts doubt on the validity of the criteria for success. The improvement in pupils' reading ability should not, in her view, be attributed solely to synthetic phonics .

Beyond reasonable doubt

This dispute may never be satisfactorily resolved, but there is plenty of other evidence which proves beyond reasonable doubt that “phonics first and fast”, is the most effective way for beginners to learn to read.

One of the best examples is the Butterfly Saturday Reading School situated in the “multiply deprived” area around the Harrow Road, near Paddington in west London. Here, every Saturday morning for the past 11 years, a group of voluntary helpers, – led by Katie Ivens, the school's Education Director – has been teaching some of the most disadvantaged children in London to read.

A number of the children have “special needs” – conditions such as autism and Tourette's syndrome; more commonly they have behavioural problems that cause them to be excluded from their primary schools for insubordination or violence.

They all learn to read. As Katie Ivens explains:

“When children come to us we give them a reading test and we allocate them to a class according to their reading level, not their actual age. They are then taught by whole class teaching, sitting at separate desks, all facing the teacher. Our teachers are not ‘trained teachers’, although they are trained (by us) and they are very effective. They are spirited and dedicated. But what is most important is that they teach by an outstanding method which is easy to

understand, easy to teach, and easy for the children to learn – the synthetic phonics course, which consists of 62 short, scripted lessons, devised by Irina Tyk (the Butterfly Book). The children learn with ease, enjoyment and great success.”

This is certainly very different, she maintains, from the “arcane and hugely expensive processes” of the Reading Recovery programme, the one-to-one (Every Child a Reader) catch-up programme which the government introduced in 2006.

In 2007 the think-tank Civitas set up a summer school for six to eight year-olds, all of them from very deprived backgrounds. Most had already fallen behind in their reading. The children’s reading ages were taken at the beginning of the two week period and then again at the end. They were given intensive lessons, using Irina Tyk’s Butterfly phonics course. After only two weeks of whole-class teaching, the children’s reading age had gone up by one year and seven months.

As *The Sunday Times* reported at the time:

“Traditional teaching of a type rarely seen in state schools in Britain since the 1960s has turned a group of inner-city children, some of whom were barely literate, into capable readers...”

Outside the UK, too, particularly in India and in African countries, where English is not the first language, synthetic phonic programmes have achieved remarkable results. In India, for instance, two professors from the University of Newcastle carried out a strictly controlled research project analysing the effects of different teaching methods in the slums of Hyderabad. English is particularly important to slum parents,

who want their children to have better chances in life than they themselves did.

Five trained researchers taught 250 children aged around six or seven for one hour a day, using the Jolly Phonics programme. A similar number of children continued using their previous method of learning whole words.

After six months, the children in the synthetic phonics group improved their reading age by an average of 13 months, while the children in the second group improved by eight months. The phonics children, according to the professors who carried out the experiment, also “grew in confidence as they could read everything that was put in front of them. “Reading words like “astronaut” was easy.”

Reading Recovery

It's true that a recent study, conducted by London's Institute of Education, found that the Every Child A Reader programme, introduced by the Government (in collaboration with charitable trusts, and the business sector) in 2006, and aimed at helping the lowest achieving children to read, was greatly improving their reading levels.

For this study, 73 children were taken out of their class and given intensive, one-to-one lessons for half an hour a day for four months. Their teachers were specially trained in the Reading Recovery method, which uses a variety of approaches rather than solely synthetic phonics. At the end of the period the children had considerably outperformed pupils in schools without the Every Child A Reader programme.

But there are two very obvious reasons why this study cannot be used as an argument against synthetic phonics Firstly, it

would be startling if intensive one-to-one teaching did not raise standards – even if phonics was only taught as part of the lesson. Secondly, the children not benefiting from the intensive teaching were not, during the same period, benefiting from being taught systematic synthetic phonics either.

Over a three year period, from 2008 to 2011, the Every Child A Reader programme is receiving £144 million of government funding.

Synthetic phonics is not a miracle cure for reading difficulties. The 25% of children who have difficulty learning how to read will still have difficulty even when they are taught with synthetic phonics. Many if not most of them will still need a certain amount of one-to-one teaching. But it is clear from research, both in the UK and internationally, that synthetic phonics is the simplest, the most effective – and by far the cheapest – way of teaching and learning the basic skill of reading.

3. IMMIGRATION

One reason often given for low literacy levels in both primary and secondary schools is the huge increase in immigration that has taken place over the past 15 years.

The proportion of pupils for whom English is an additional language – EAL students, to use one of education’s numerous acronyms – is now, in many inner city schools, over 60%.

It is hardly surprising, say many teachers, that these children will have difficulties with reading. I have been told over and over again that it is to these “newcomers” that the low literacy levels should be attributed.

But there is much evidence to show that immigration is not at the root of the problem – though of course children who have very recently arrived in this country are bound to lower literacy scores, at least temporarily.

“Immigration is often an excuse for low achieving schools in urban areas with a high ethnic minority intake”, says Sir Michael Wilshaw, the head of Mossbourne Community Academy. Literacy levels of EAL children are low, he firmly believes,

because they are being taught by teachers who have low expectations of their true potential.

“These children are usually keen to learn and extremely well behaved. My experience of Mossbourne and similar schools is that if early and effective literacy programmes are put into place, EAL pupils make rapid progress.”

Other headteachers agree. Elizabeth Phillips, who runs one of London’s most highly-rated secondary schools, St. Marylebone, has similar views. When I asked her whether she thought that immigration was the main cause of low reading standards, she replied:

“No. 60% of our pupils are immigrants and they have no problems reading. When we take them in with no English we can get them up to standard in six months.”

Avril Newman, in whose school the majority of children are second generation immigrants, goes even further:

“If you’ve got a first language you’re likely to be better at a second.”

Her school’s exemplary reading scores were achieved mainly by EAL pupils. They were also FSM (free school meals) children – those from the poorest backgrounds. Her school uses the popular “Jolly Phonics” systematic reading course.

There is in fact a great deal of evidence (from reports by the government and by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, for example) to show that it is white working-class children who

have the most intractable reading difficulties. Unlike most immigrant parents, who are very keen on their children receiving a good education even if they themselves speak very little English, white working-class parents often seem to be indifferent to their children's education. The assessment data from Mossbourne and other Academies show that EAL students can make remarkable progress in contrast to children from indigenous backgrounds where aspirations are low and parental support is lacking.

Special Educational Needs

Language difficulties, however, are not the only "excuse" for low literacy rates. Another reason given by teachers is the high number of children (20% across inner London schools) with Special Educational Needs (SEN), including dyslexia.

Again, many heads and literacy experts disagree. They maintain that numerous SEN pupils would not be in this category if they had been taught consistently and rigorously in the first years of school. "Learning difficulties and behavioural problems will increase if children are not taught consistently and systematically right from the beginning," insists the headteacher Avril Newman.

Research in the US and elsewhere has even shown that the symptoms of dyslexia are often aggravated by methods other than phonics, particularly by the "whole word" approach. As the Special Educational Needs Officer at the Capital City Academy explains:

"If my SEN pupils had been taught phonics at their primary schools in the way we teach them now, our SEN programme would be much smaller."

This does not apply, of course, to the small number – no more than 3% – of SEN children who have been diagnosed as suffering from severe disabilities.

Speaking “Street”

There is another language issue which is rarely mentioned: “Street” English, the argot in which children – both white and non-white – who live in the poorer areas of inner cities often speak to each other. This language contains a mix of various ethnic influences – Caribbean, Cockney, Afro-American, Indian and others. Like dialects and slang in other countries, “Street” has its own grammar, its own vocabulary and its own pronunciation.

In other European countries argot and slang are not allowed into the classroom; children know exactly what is “correct” usage in their main language, and what is not. In this country, by contrast, primary school teachers – dedicated as many of them are to “child-led” education – don’t feel that it’s their role to interfere with self expression in any shape or form. On the contrary, they encourage children to read poems and stories written in ethnic dialects – in Barbadian patois, for example – which is fine, but they omit to point out that there are linguistic discrepancies.

Only later, when they get to secondary school, do these pupils discover that “Street” is not acceptable in their written work. Understandably, they find this both confusing and discouraging.

4. WHAT'S HAPPENING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS NOW?

There is now a mass of evidence that more rigour in general and more synthetic phonics in particular would raise literacy standards.

This especially applies to children from the poorest areas, particularly to boys, who are the worst performers in schools. Research shows that boys benefit most from discipline in the classroom and from learning to read by a systematic, methodical technique.

These findings have been embraced by Michael Gove, the new Minister for Education and by Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister. As far as they are concerned, the “reading wars” are over, the clear winner being synthetic phonics. Equally, in the argument about teaching methods, structure has won out over “child-led” education.

But can these new ministers bring about a u-turn in the attitudes of educationalists? Will they succeed in changing the ethos which has been so deeply implanted for so long in the minds of so many primary school teachers?

What has to be recognised much more strongly, if the Government is to succeed in raising literacy standards, is the crucial importance of primary schools and what goes on in them. Class sizes, school equipment, school buildings, the creation of new schools, “intervention” programmes for struggling pupils – these all matter. But teaching methods and the quality of teachers matter much more. As the highly experienced Avril Newman stresses:

“If children can’t read by the age of five or six, their education will be blighted.”

But it is not just learning how to read and write that becomes much harder after the age of 11 – so does how to articulate, how to concentrate, how to behave, how to work. Or, to quote Plato: “The most important part of education is training in the nursery.”

Before 11 almost all children are eager and able to absorb information. After 11, if their minds haven’t been stretched, they may already have been turned off the whole idea of education.

Pretending to read

When I asked Sir Michael Wilshaw (recently described by Michael Gove as one of the very best headteachers in English education today) why, in his opinion, 100 out of 208 pupils who entered Mossbourne Academy last year had trouble with reading and writing, his answer was simple:

“Primary schools aren’t teaching them properly”.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the abilities of most of these children, Sir Michael added.

“What is wrong is that their previous schools have not provided the kind of framework and culture in which learning can take place.”

The figures are similar at many of London’s secondary schools. About 40% of children who arrive from inner city primary schools – even if they have done reasonably well in the required national tests (key Stage 2 SATs [standard assessment tests]) – have a reading age of between 6 and 9. (Many of them, as I have frequently been told, were helped with the SATs by teachers desperate to meet government targets.)

The Assistant Principal of the Capital City Academy, Matt Stevens, informed me:

“The children who can’t read have learned how to avoid reading. Whenever they’re asked to read they do something disruptive to get themselves sent out of the classroom. They’re brilliant at masking not being able to read in all kinds of ways, and they’re masters at pattern recognition and interpreting teachers’ expressions to find the answer. It’s very difficult to teach these children at this stage, though it can be done. We use the Ruth Miskin synthetic phonics programme designed for primary schools.”

Teacher training

When I asked Chris Woodhead, the former Chief Inspector of Schools, whether he thought the new Government would succeed in getting schools to break away from the prevailing anti-didactic ideology, he warned:

“Whitehall can’t impose its will on 24,000 schools – a lesson Mr Gove has yet to learn. Too many of the

academics and advisers and inspectors who tell teachers how to teach continue to resist the central importance of synthetic phonics.”

The ambiguously worded advice in the 2006 Rose Report, that the teaching of phonics should be “set within a broad and language-rich curriculum”, has not helped. It has given plenty of scope for teacher-trainers to continue with business as usual – recommending an assortment of methods to their students for teaching to read.

This was borne out when I visited the English Tutor and Co-ordinator for primary education at the Institute of Education (IOE), London’s most prestigious teacher training establishment. She was an advocate of a “range of approaches” to cater for a range of abilities, and was much concerned about the difficulties some children have with the aural discrimination of separate sounds. She also placed a great deal of emphasis on the complexities of linguistics. Yet she lamented:

“We’ve had directive after directive from the government and we have to cover so many areas and subjects that I barely have time to introduce the students to phonics.”

One such student at the Institute of Education, an exceptionally bright and enthusiastic graduate from India, gave me the following account of her dismaying experiences. She had won a much sought-after place on a post-graduate course, in the expectation of learning how to become a primary school teacher and of gaining a PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education). She is now half-way through this two-year part-time course.

So far, she says, she has learned nothing.

“We’re not taught *how* to teach. We have lectures with lots of waffle – but nothing about how to control a class or transmit information.”

The course costs £10,000 for overseas students.

She has spent two terms as a trainee in an east London primary school, where she was distressed, she told me, by how little learning takes place. The children spend too much time playing. They are often bored. They all have computers but many of them can’t read. Phonics is not a priority,

Her “mentor” (all PGCE students are assigned a mentor by the Institute) whose role it is to advise and help has never responded to her emails or helped her in any way. When he came to the school to assess her progress, she gave a carefully planned lesson on the subject of advertising to a class of seven-year-olds. She felt that it had gone well and that the children had enjoyed it.

Her mentor, however, had judged her lesson unsatisfactory. Why? Because it had not been sufficiently “child-led”. Her crime had been to say to a little boy who had interrupted with an irrelevant story: “That’s most interesting, but can you tell me later?” According to the mentor, she should instead have allowed the child to continue, even though he was disrupting the concentration of the rest of the class.

5. FACTS ARE FUN

“Child-led” education is alive and kicking. Many of the primary school classes I have sat in on have been conducted according to its precepts: Ask pupils questions rather than give answers. Elicit information rather than impart it. Allow pupils as much choice as possible in what tasks and activities they undertake in class. Don’t interrupt a pupil, whatever he or she may be saying. Don’t put pressure on children to learn something if they don’t want to. Whatever you do, don’t be didactic. And so on.

Of course the teaching of reading and writing should be made as much fun as possible; and of course pupils should be encouraged to find things out for themselves where they can. Of course, too, young children should have English lessons which include comprehension and discussion of stories and poems which they can’t yet themselves read – as long as it’s not at the same time as they are learning the basics of decoding.

But the child-led approach is frequently neither stimulating nor challenging. Very young children simply haven’t got the tools or the knowledge to benefit from it or to make sensible choices. Disciplined learning and enjoyment are not mutually exclusive.

In the lessons I observed, the pace was often very slow and the children frequently seemed bored and distracted. Their potential for learning was hardly tapped. Their memory 'muscle' was certainly not being developed.

You don't have to go as far as G.K. Chesterton, who asserted that: "A teacher who is not dogmatic is simply a teacher who is not teaching". But it is precisely the absence of genuine teaching which has so damaged educational standards. And this applies particularly to reading. Synthetic phonics relies on the teacher to teach, rather than the child to discover.

What the majority of young children at this stage of their lives are good at, indeed better than they will ever be again, is memorizing and retaining facts – facts which it will be much more difficult, and tedious, to learn when they are older.

Even children without particular linguistic gifts, for example, can learn new languages far more easily and rapidly than adults; or they can memorize the names of innumerable football players. Moreover, children visibly enjoy the sense of achievement which comes with accumulating information.

This priceless asset, however, has been, and is still being, squandered in many of our primary schools.

6. A GOOD SCHOOL

My observations in classrooms in various parts of London, and the conversations I have had with experienced teachers and literacy experts, all point to a clear conclusion: that there are some features which nearly all primary schools need if they are to be successful, irrespective of their pupils' backgrounds. Equally, if a school has only a few of these elements, it is unlikely to succeed, again whatever the children's circumstances.

In an ideal primary school:

- Headteachers would establish a disciplined framework in which teaching and learning could take place with minimal disruption.
- Teachers would abandon the idea that imparting knowledge is oppressive and that facts interfere with creativity.
- Teachers would not underestimate the intellectual potential of their pupils. They would realise that young children are stimulated by information and ideas that they cannot discover for themselves.
- Mixed ability teaching would be discarded wherever possible as it usually leaves children at both ends of the spectrum frustrated. It also makes teaching much more difficult and slows down the pace of lessons.

- Teachers would not be afraid of putting reasonable pressure on children to perform their tasks.
- Children would be taught to read through synthetic phonics which, despite its complex-sounding name, is demonstrably the simplest and most effective way of teaching the basic skill of reading.
- One of the tried and tested synthetic phonics courses would be taught consistently throughout the school. Teachers would be trained to teach the course that has been chosen; this does not usually take more than two or three days.
- Phonics would be kept distinct from comprehension. If they are linked, children tend to guess at words and the effectiveness of phonics-teaching is undermined. This has caused confusion and semi-literacy.
- Children would be given books to read that match the standard they have reached. If a book is too advanced, pupils feel discouraged. This is particularly important for those who do not have help at home.
- Parents would be informed by schools which phonics programme their child is using so that they can help him or her at home. Schools would put links to the programme on their website.
- Teachers would correct children (with sensitivity) when they make mistakes, both in written and in spoken English.
- The quality of writing (grammar, punctuation etc) would be taken into account in subjects other than in English. This is even more important in secondary schools.
- Children would be given short, objective, national tests at the age of seven or eight to ensure that they have learned to read. Parents would be told the result of their child's test.

These elements would also – ideally – be reflected in other areas of education. So Ofsted, for example, would give priority to academic attainment over and above environmental and social issues when assessing schools. And teacher training courses would teach primary school teachers to instruct rather than “facilitate”; and they would make sure that trainees learn how to teach phonics.

How do we get there?

Can tens of thousands of professional teachers be persuaded that what they have been doing, however well-intentioned, is wrong? Given that the education establishment is hostile to reforms of the kind that are needed, it is very unlikely that yet more diktats from central government will bring about the required transformation. Our present Education Ministers may know best how to improve literacy standards, but the challenge is getting local authorities and schools to recognise this.

One step towards achieving this might be to initiate an annual contest among London primary schools – a kind of Booker Prize for literacy, perhaps sponsored by one of the large corporations which have been so vehement in complaining about the poor skills of school leavers. The competing schools would be independently assessed culminating in three winners and 10 runners-up. Every child and all the relevant teachers in the winning schools would then be given an award at a large prize-giving party. The winning schools would get a substantial cash award to be spent entirely at the head teachers discretion. The teaching methods of the successful schools – as well as the conduct and enthusiasm of children – would be analysed so that teachers and parents alike can see which approach works best.



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