



## **ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR EDUCATION**

### **LITERACY INQUIRY**

#### **A submission from the National Union of Teachers**

**May 2011**

The National Union of Teachers welcomes the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education's inquiry on Literacy and the opportunity to contribute this written submission.

The NUT is the largest teachers' union, with members working in all phases and sectors of education, including in local authority advisory services and inspectors, who contribute to the development of NUT policy.

#### **Guiding principles on the teaching of reading**

The NUT believes that one of the central aims of education should be to ensure that every child attains full reading literacy at the earliest possible age. In the Union's experience, there are general conditions which can be created in schools which are the basis of effective practice for the teaching of reading:

- schools should have a whole school approach to the teaching of reading;
- reading should be part of a school's integrated approach to the teaching of literacy, and as such should be developed along with children's writing, speaking and listening skills;
- a school's approach to teaching reading should ideally involve teachers and parents working together, with a shared understanding that reading should be for meaning and enjoyment as well as an essential skill; and
- schools need to have whole-school diagnostic methods of assessing children's progress in reading, which can both inform the practice of subsequent teachers and communicate to parents the continuing needs and achievements of their children.

The NUT believes that such conditions form the basis of the successful teaching and learning of reading. The methods or combination of methods will be chosen by an individual teacher in consultation with her or his colleagues in order to match the circumstances and meet the needs of the group of children. To this end, the findings of the Bullock Report<sup>1</sup>, published in 1975, still remain true today: "*there is no one method, medium, approach, device or philosophy that holds the key to the process of learning to read*". If there was, it would have been seized upon by teachers long ago.

Of course none of this is achievable without adequate funding, educational resources and staffing arrangements. It must be recognised that the above conditions cannot be separated from the need for manageable class sizes; adequate numbers of trained,

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<sup>1</sup> Bullock A., "*A Language for Life*", HMSO, 1978

motivated teachers with expertise both to encourage and develop children's reading and to intervene and support children experiencing difficulty; and lastly, adequate amounts of relevant attractive and high quality books and materials.

The NUT would stress that qualified teachers are among a school's most valuable resources. The Programme for International Student Assessment<sup>2</sup> asked school leaders to indicate the percentage of teachers with a university-level qualification in their respective subject area. Having more of these teachers was associated, on average across OECD countries, with better student results. For example, in reading, a 25 percentage point increase in the proportion of teachers with a university-level qualification in the relevant subject was associated with an advantage of 9 points on the reading literacy scale, on average across OECD countries.

### **Government thinking on improving literacy: a critique of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check**

Currently one of the most pervasive myths about the way children are taught to read is that synthetic phonics are rarely, if ever used. The Government's proposals for a Year 1 Phonics Screening Check appear to be predicated on this basis and may have been conceived as a means of enforcing compliance with the Government's policy on this issue. Anyone who is familiar with English primary schools will know that this is a gross distortion of teaching methods in Key Stage 1.

The NUT will not rehearse here its arguments against the prescription of systematic synthetic phonics as the only means of teaching children to read. For every piece of research cited in the recent Department for Education consultation document<sup>3</sup> in support of this approach, there are equally valid studies which come to another conclusion.

The Union would argue that the proposed introduction of such a test in isolation, at a time when the Key Stage 2 assessment and accountability arrangements are also under consultation, implies a disjointed approach to policy by Government. It would have been more sensible to consider primary assessment and accountability as part of the same consultation exercise, to provide a more coherent and holistic approach to their future development. It would also be useful for the Government to suggest which assessments schools should stop doing as a result of the new test. Simply adding yet more forms of statutory assessment to the primary phase will not raise standards but will exacerbate what the terms of reference<sup>4</sup> for the Key Stage 2 review describe as the "*over-rehearsal and reduced focus on productive learning*" resulting from their link with school accountability.

The NUT believes that it is fundamentally inappropriate to introduce a phonics screening check as a statutory requirement for all pupils in Year 1. The proposed test will not provide teachers and schools with any additional information about pupils beyond that which they already have through on-going assessment in class, internal reading tests and monitoring of standards as part of teachers' regular assessment practices.

Whilst it is important that all children learn to read and receive additional support if required, it is inappropriate to conduct such a narrow test on children at age six as their

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<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Knowledge and skills for life - First Results from PISA 2000*, OECD, 2001

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/Reading%20test%20consultation%20document%20V2.doc>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.education.gov.uk/ks2review/a0076287/key-stage-2-testing-and-accountability-review-terms-of-reference>

differing experiences to that point will have an effect on their ability to react appropriately in such a situation. The effect of children's pre-school educational experience, socio-economic background, their gender and the time of the year they were born all create significant differences in achievement at this age. The screening check may therefore reveal more about the profile of the school's intake than about individual children's reading abilities. It is certainly likely that schools serving the most disadvantaged areas will record the lowest scores, whether or not they teach reading exclusively through systematic synthetic phonics.

A 40 word test of any sort is demanding for many children of this age and is likely to take far longer than five minutes to complete, as suggested in the consultation document, particularly as the teacher would have to explain about the "nonsense" words included in the check and provide some sort of context before the child attempted the word, such as *"the name of a type of imaginary creature"* (paragraph 4.4).

The NUT believes that there is little merit in asking children to sound out words out of context and that the inclusion of nonsense words, to make up half of the test, will confuse many children unless they have been drilled during test practice sessions beforehand, which would defeat the Government's supposed aim of *"an increase in the number of children able to read for enjoyment and understanding"* (paragraph 2.1).

Children need to make sense of what they read. There is a danger that using isolated skills as the sole measure of progress in the test will mean that less emphasis is placed on the meaning of what is being read in general. In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that the use of nonsense words in the test would provide useful or accurate information about children's ability as readers. It is certainly not a predicator of ability to read for understanding, as the consultation document acknowledges: *"it would not be appropriate to link knowledge of phonics with reading ability in general"* (paragraph 8.3). It is also likely that some children will do much better reading real words than nonsense words.

Consideration should always be given to the needs of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and English as an additional language, or to pupils with visual or hearing impairment. The aforementioned consultation on phonics, however, says only that these matters will be addressed at some future, unspecified, time (paragraph 7.3 -4). This is not an acceptable approach to the assessment of some of the most vulnerable children who are in need of specialist support when learning to read, not a blunt assessment instrument which almost appears to have been designed for them to fail.

This aspect of the application and impact of the test is of most concern to the NUT and contradicts the consultation paper's claim that the test will be supportive in nature. Its inherent injustice is highlighted by the proposal that, should a child fail to meet the standard required at the end of Year 1, they will be required to retake the test in the autumn term. Does the Government intend that those children who experience most difficulty learning to read would have to keep taking the test until they pass it, or leave school? What purpose would such repeated testing have, other than to cement the impression that the child is a failure? In this context, the young age that children would take this test has to be kept in mind, as a self-perception that one is not "good" at reading could easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy which could damage the child's future educational prospects.

Phonics on its own will not produce fluent readers. Although arguably the most important, phonics is only one among a number of cueing systems which contribute to word identification. Becoming a fluent and accurate reader means learning to make effective and coherent use of all of the cueing systems – the grapho-phonetic, the

syntactic, the semantic, the bibliographic and the pictorial. It also means learning to put the information together 'harmoniously'.

To read fluently, children need to use their developing construction of sense from the text they are reading, both as an aid to word identification and as a corrective when the process has gone awry. Phonics plays a crucial part in reading but on its own is not enough for readers of any age to identify ambiguous words, words with unusual spelling patterns or the very many irregular spelled words in the English language.

### **Reading for Pleasure**

The NUT believes that the active encouragement of reading for pleasure should be a core part of every child's English curriculum entitlement, whatever their background or attainment, as extensive reading and exposure to a wide range of texts make a huge contribution to students' educational achievement. Research has shown how developing a love of reading is important for children's life chances. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "*Finding ways to engage pupils in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change*"<sup>5</sup>. Analysis showed that students whose parents had the lowest occupational status but who were highly engaged in reading obtained higher average reading scores than students whose parents had high or medium occupational status but who were poorly engaged in reading.

Researchers in England<sup>6</sup> have noted that "*as students become engaged readers, they provide themselves with self-generated learning opportunities that are equivalent to several years of education.*" They also reported that children with a positive attitude to reading are more likely to practice the reading skills they are learning at school more.

According to international research, children in England do not enjoy reading as much as they might. The most recent comparative study of the reading attainment of ten year olds, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) was conducted in 2006. Key findings included:

*"A child who approaches reading confidently is more likely to seek out opportunities to read, to read more frequently and more widely. On average, children in England expressed less confidence about their reading attainment than their peers in most other countries"*

England in fact ranked 23rd out of 29 countries in terms of pupils' attitudes to reading. It could be argued that the current approach to teaching reading and recognising reading achievement reinforces a sense of failure in children which, in turn, affects their achievement and widens the gap between the highest and lowest achievers. However, there is evidence<sup>7</sup> that children can be motivated to read by both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. For example, to satisfy their own reading interests and to comply with school demands, pupils may show intrinsically as well as extrinsically motivated reading behaviour. Extrinsic motivation can be harnessed to bring about intrinsic motivation and vice versa. A concern would be that the recent announcement by the Secretary of State of a list of fifty books that every child should read will become a chore and ultimately damaging to the idea of reading for pleasure.

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<sup>5</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Reading for Change*, OECD, 2002

<sup>6</sup> Guthrie J.T. & Wigfield A., *Engagement and Motivation in Reading*, 2000

<sup>7</sup> Clark C. and Rumbold K., *Reading for Pleasure: A Research Overview*, National Literacy Trust, 2006

The NUT believes that a revised National Curriculum should, as a minimum, include explicit references to developing a love of reading for its own sake and the provision of opportunities for children to read self-selected materials. The NUT has published a booklet and on-line resource guide which contain much more detail about how this could be achieved in practice in schools and would encourage members of the APPG to view these at [www.teachers.org.uk/reading](http://www.teachers.org.uk/reading)

### **Oracy**

Much greater attention should also be given to the development of children's spoken language and the potential of drama and role play to aid language development in the primary phase. This has long been a neglected aspect of literacy provision, because of its relative unimportance in the National Strategies.

Speaking and listening should be part of a school's integrated approach to the teaching of literacy and as such should be developed along with children's writing and reading skills. Boys' achievements in both reading and writing have been a matter of long-standing concern. A research project undertaken by the Primary National Strategy and the United Kingdom Literacy Association on this issue<sup>8</sup> found a link between improved levels of attainment in reading and speaking and listening, as well as the target area of writing, following its use of integrated teaching units for literacy which used either a variety of visual stimuli or drama and other speaking and listening technologies. These findings would suggest that an increased focus on spoken language would be beneficial for all aspects of literacy within the revised programme of study for English.

### **Play-based learning**

An area of particular interest for the NUT is the contribution that a play-based approach to teaching and learning can make to children's development in its widest sense. The NUT believes that 'enjoyment' and 'achievement' are inextricably linked. The NUT published practical guidance for teachers wishing to teach the curriculum using play-based approaches in its Play Policy 'Time to Play' and accompanying booklet 'Putting Play into Practice'.<sup>9</sup> It says that "Play in the school context means that children and young people should be given sufficient freedom and space regularly within the school day to use their imagination to explore both old and new concepts and develop confidence in a safe environment".

Recent work on brain studies has added greatly to our understanding and appreciation of play as a medium for learning in the primary phase. Neurophysiology tells us that until children are six or seven years old they require more access to free play than older children. The work of Professors Susan Greenfield<sup>10</sup> of the University of Oxford and Howard Gardner<sup>11</sup> of the University of Harvard, for example, indicates that learning happens through the connections made within the brain as a result of external stimuli received through the senses. The emotions are as fundamental to the functioning of the brain as 'logical' thought, so we need to feel good about ourselves in order to learn. Since play is a low-risk, inherently enjoyable activity, the associated emotional encoding will tend to be positive.

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<sup>8</sup>Primary National Strategy and the United Kingdom Literacy Association, *Raising Boys' Achievements in Writing*, PNS/UKLA, 2004

<sup>9</sup><http://www.teachers.org.uk/node/11050>

<sup>10</sup>Greenfield, S., *The Human Brain: A Guided Tour*, Phoenix, 2004

<sup>11</sup>Gardner, H., *The Disciplined Mind*, Prentice Hall, 1999

As indicated above, the kinds of cognitive and physical abilities identified as vital for people in the 21st Century can, however, be fostered through a play-based approach to learning<sup>12</sup>. This is not to say that core skills such as literacy are unimportant but rather, that the efficacy of the teaching and learning of these skills would benefit from a more playful approach in the primary phase.

### **Transition between school stages**

A fundamental principal of the National Curriculum is that it should represent a holistic continuum for children's learning. Many of the current curricular inconsistencies arise from the fact that the National Curriculum has not been reviewed as a whole, but rather as discrete 'chunks' relating to the various phases of education. The focus of the current review, which looks at provision 5 – 16, is therefore extremely welcome. The NUT has said that it would be useful to strengthen this by offering a commitment to a planned rolling programme of review and evaluation in the future, rather than undertake review only as a reaction to perceived problems.

The disconnect between the current primary National Curriculum and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) have made it extremely difficult for schools to be able to accommodate the needs of children who are still working towards the 'expected' Early Learning Goal outcomes, particularly those related to literacy. The two new curricula must dovetail completely in order to ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of all children in both Year 1 and Reception, which is officially the final year of the EYFS. That does not mean, however, that the curriculum approach of Key Stage 1 should influence or be imposed on the EYFS – rather, that the EYFS should be the main influence on KS1 curriculum design, as it is more developmentally appropriate for young children.

In practice, Reception is commonly treated as the first year of Key Stage 1. NUT Reception class teachers have increasingly reported that they are subject to pressure to adopt formal teaching approaches that they believe to be inappropriate for young children, particularly because of the National Literacy and Numeracy frameworks and the Key Stage 1 tests. There is also some evidence that Ofsted inspectors expect to see whole class formal teaching of literacy and numeracy in the Reception year. This expectation can naturally influence teachers to adopt a formal approach throughout the EYFS, but especially in the Reception year.

It is also important to note that when a child begins schooling, levels of preparedness for reading varies considerably. This is dependent on a number of factors inside and outside the home, such as:

- social and cultural attitudes to what reading is for, and its value;
- socio-economic status, which affects access to books and dictates how much time is available for reading and being read to;
- access to pre-school provision, which enhances children's language development through a rich variety of activities involving talking and listening, including reading stories, singing songs, so familiarising them with the value of written text;
- access to public libraries and parental knowledge of what materials are available within them; and

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<sup>12</sup> Moyles, J. *The Excellence of Play*, Open University Press, 2005

- parental attitudes from their own success/failure at reading.

Schools and teachers need sufficient flexibility within the National Curriculum to meet individual pupils' starting points. Currently Key Stage 1 pupils are treated as a homogenous group both in terms of curriculum and assessment and expected levels of performance.

### **Every Child a Reader**

The Every Child a Reader (ECaR) programme is the latest in a long line of intervention programmes managed by the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). ECaR is informed, in part, by the well-respected and much-evaluated Reading Recovery programme developed by Marie Clay in New Zealand, which aims to reduce literacy failure in education systems through early intervention. This has been subject to a large number of national and international evaluations of its effectiveness since it was first established in 1976 – 77 and has been the focus of an annual national monitoring programme since 1984. In addition, it is a structural feature of Reading Recovery implementation to report annually on the progress and outcome data for every child receiving tuition. This information is used to monitor effectiveness, ensure a high quality of delivery, and to continuously assess and re-adjust the design of the implementation.

The ECaR project was first run as a pilot scheme by the KPMG Foundation between 2005 and 2008. Its main aims included securing sustainable investment for widespread implementation of Reading Recovery and exploring how intensive support in reading could be provided in the most cost-effective way nationally.

In the ECaR programme, children in Year 1 and 2 who are struggling to learn to read and to write may be offered a programme of interventions, of which Reading Recovery is one element. Unlike the “pure” model of Reading Recovery, not all children receive individual tuition from specially trained teachers, only those who are experiencing the most difficulty. The rest are typically taught by support staff, who will have received some training from the specialist Reading Recovery teacher in school. ECaR may also be delivered to groups of children, rather than on a one-to-one basis. Whilst this obviously addresses the brief regarding cost-effectiveness, it ignores the particular benefits identified in the research literature by these two central features of Reading Recovery.

Another key difference between ECaR and Reading Recovery is that, for the latter, nominated teachers undertake a year-long in-service course run by a Reading Recovery tutor in their area. During fortnightly sessions throughout the course, teachers are trained in the use of specific Reading Recovery teaching procedures, while working daily with a minimum of four children. Although ECaR teachers also undertake a year's Reading Recovery training in England, they are expected to cascade their training to other colleagues, including support staff, who will be responsible for the delivery of other ECaR intervention programmes.

There is certainly a substantial body of research literature which suggests that the most effective interventions are those offered to children in their first years of schooling. The NUT supports the longer-term strategy of ECaR, of identifying children who are failing to make acceptable progress at the end of Year 1 and providing intensive support to help them “catch up”. The NUT has serious concerns, however, that the programme “*is designed to get a child with their needs back to age appropriate expectations*” and that children are identified as suitable for Wave 2 ECaR if they are “*just below national expectations*”, with Wave 3 designated for children who are either “*struggling*” or “*lowest attaining*”.

The Government's concept of "age appropriate expectations" is worrying in relation to ECaR because of the age of the children who will be subject to it. Due to developments in neurophysiology there is now increasing evidence to support the view that up to the age of eight, children develop at markedly different rates or, as some more experienced teachers might describe them, some children are "late bloomers". It is essential that a clear distinction is made between those who genuinely do have cognitive difficulties and those who simply require a little more time.

A report published by the European Centre for Reading Recovery<sup>13</sup> in May 2011 has revealed that since 2007 ECaR schools have shown a much greater increase in attainment in Key Stage 1 assessments than non-ECaR schools. From 2007 to 2010, there was a 7% increase at National Curriculum level 2 (the national standard) or above in reading for ECaR schools compared with 1% for non-ECaR schools, with a 6% increase at level 2b (a "strong average" score) or above, when non-ECaR schools flatlined. Despite such evidence, EcaR will no longer be supported centrally.

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<sup>13</sup>[http://www.ioe.ac.uk/newsEvents/documents/News and Events Events/Every Child a Reader \(ECaR\) Annual Report 2009-10.pdf](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/newsEvents/documents/News%20and%20Events%20Events/Every%20Child%20a%20Reader%20(ECaR)%20Annual%20Report%202009-10.pdf)