

# All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education

Chairman - Fabian Hamilton MP

Vice-Chairmen - Martin Horwood MP, Baroness Perry of Southwark

Treasurer - Baroness Walmsley

Secretary - Nic Dakin MP

## Responses to the APPG for Education's Report of the Inquiry into Overcoming the Barriers to Literacy

***Recommendation 1: Literacy is an essential life skill which begins when pupils start reading for pleasure. The Department for Education needs to acknowledge that literacy is more than a mechanical skill.***

In response, the **Department for Education** acknowledged that “the teaching of phonics is most effective when combined with a language-rich curriculum to develop children’s positive attitudes towards literacy”. The Department also stated that there is substantial evidence to show that systematic synthetic phonics is the best way in which to improve reading standards, and that it produces greater levels of improvement than other schemes. It highlighted that systematic synthetic phonics is particularly successful with younger, at-risk readers. DfE disagreed that the Year 1 phonics test could discourage and demoralise children, stating that children would be unaware that they are being assessed, that the test only takes five minutes of each child’s time, and that teachers are able to stop the test for children who find the test too difficult.

However, a number of respondents expressed concerns that phonics teaches children isolated words, rather than the ability to read for meaning; that is, to read for reading’s sake. **Voice, the Union for Education Professionals**, expressed considerable support for this APPG recommendation, saying that a love of reading can only be developed when a child understands what they are reading and consequently enjoy it. The **National Union of Teachers (NUT)** said that encouraging children to enjoy reading was the “most important issue for teachers”, and that this risks being overlooked through the sole use of phonics. The NUT agreed that phonics has a role to play in teaching children to read, but that it should by no means be thought of as the only possible method. **Emma Plackett, co-founder of Reading Revival**, emphasised that methods that teach children to read for pleasure can improve literacy rates at a far higher rate.<sup>1</sup>

Voice agreed with the report’s conclusion that while phonics can be useful, it cannot be successful in the cases of all children, particularly those with special needs. **Sally Collard, a specialist in dyslexia**, agreed, stating that she had “long witnessed the demotivation, confusion and disabling impact” of systematic synthetic phonics on those who already struggle with reading. She has also witnessed the dramatic improvements in dyslexic children after following additional, more engaging methods of accessing reading experience and success. Voice also highlighted that dyslexic children find it very difficult to recognise words out of their context, so phonics must be used “as part of a wider toolkit to support children in learning to read”.

The report’s focus on the need for schools to encourage children to enjoy reading was also heavily focused upon by the media. Articles in the **Times Educational Supplement**, **The Guardian**, and **The Telegraph** all led with the concern that phonics could put children off reading and lead to a decline in literacy standards, because it can make reading seem boring and the process seem a perfunctory exercise, rather than something that is enjoyable and exciting.

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<sup>1</sup> Reading Revival involves teaching children to recognise a word from its context to make reading enjoyable from the beginning. The company states they have “consistently shown” its methods can bring an average class of five-year-olds with no reading ability to a reading age of seven within one term; this level of progress generally takes 18 months.

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## ***Recommendation 2: Teachers must be able to choose their own resources for literacy to suit individual literacy needs.***

The **BBC** led with the theme that schools are “pushed into phonics by financial incentives” from the government, stating that this was dangerous in shepherding “cash-strapped” schools towards a system of phonics when it might not be the best system for the school or for its pupils.

The **NUT** agreed with the inquiry, arguing that the government’s persistent focus on phonics showed that it did not trust the better judgement of teachers. It stated that teachers must be free to adapt the teaching methods they use, and criticised the government’s “heavy handed” approach of using funding for phonics to force schools into adopt this approach due to their limited budgets and need for additional funding.

The **DfE** emphasised that schools are free to choose their resources from their overall schools budget. The Government’s catalogue for the £3000 matched phonics funding available to schools is intended to ensure that it “is spent only on products and training which meet set quality criteria”.

## ***Recommendation 3: Literacy is not just a primary school issue. There needs to be a focus by the Department for Education on post-primary school literacy issues.***

The **DfE** noted that its new school inspection scheme – by looking at reading, writing, mathematics and communication – would promote accountability, and also be applicable to the transition from Key Stage 2 to 3.

## ***Recommendation 4: There should be a focus on parental support and early intervention by funding wider programmes to ensure that parents read with their children and have access to books.***

**DfE** acknowledged the importance of the early years and the effect that parental encouragement has on literacy levels. The Sure Start children’s centres are being retained, with a focus on those in most need of support. This includes £13.5m for Bookstart to deliver a new free book programme. The Government promotes family support services and is also looking at how schools can best work with parents.

The **BBC** report further underlined and supported the idea that teachers and parents should be “encouraged to work together” to help to improve a child’s reading ability. **Sally Collard**, having run courses to support parents of dyslexic children, agreed that boosting parental support was absolutely critical in successfully teaching children to read, particularly for those with learning difficulties.<sup>2</sup> She also emphasises the importance of recognising (and respecting) the different opportunities and skills available within the home. Parents welcome ‘home-friendly’ activities and strategies in place of an expectation that they acquire teaching skills.

## ***Recommendation 5: The Government should recognise the part that the resources industry plays in the creation of materials that help schools and teachers to meet their goals.***

The **DfE** accepted that effective use of technology, such as multimedia e-books, can improve reading standards, and can be particularly useful in closing the achievement gap between the sexes. The Department acknowledged the need, as highlighted by the report, for the Government to work with the educational supplies industry to help teachers achieve their goals and to inform the industry of policy changes.

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<sup>2</sup> Mrs Collard provided figures to demonstrate the importance of ‘home-friendly’ parental support, showing that after adults followed the “Supporting the Dyslexic Child” course (run in Cornwall through the Cornwall Dyslexia Association) their dyslexic children’s literacy confidence and skills increased by an average of 32%; their numeracy confidence and skills increased by an average of 23%; and their self-esteem increased by an average of 26%.

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**Susan Stranks, the director of abracaDABra!** (a children's internet service), highlighted the importance of technology. She stated that radio has a "vital role to play in bringing children the joy of stories and the pleasure of reading" through schemes such as "Read-along Radio", where children follow the stories in print while listening to authors read these stories. Ms Stranks also said that these forms of technology had the potential to engage parents with their children's reading, thereby supporting a further theme of the inquiry. She cited Dr Cathy Hamer, of "Talk to Your Baby", who said that "sharing books and listening to radio ... is an excellent way for parents and practitioners to promote a child's love of books from an early age".

***Recommendation 6: There should be a major review of assessment and the curriculum across the whole system***

The **DfE** said that it had accepted the recommendations from Lord Bew's review of assessment in full, with those reforms intended to create a fairer and more effective system of raising standards. It is also currently reviewing the National Curriculum, examining the most successful approaches from around the work and aiming to slim down the curriculum to give teachers more freedom.

***Recommendation 7: The right of citizens to visit a library and have access to a range of free reading material must be made overt and funding made available***

**The Bookseller's** coverage of the inquiry focused on the contribution of libraries to literacy standards, and the consequent need for coherent support and funding for libraries from the government. It also linked this with the theme of parental encouragement, stating that the support of parents would be critical in avoiding further library closures. The **NUT** agreed that the Government should reconsider funding cuts which were closing libraries, stating that it "needs to look at the wider social implications" for children's literacy levels.

The **DfE** recognised the positive contribution to literacy standards of good libraries, but rather than a library being mandated that schools have the freedom to make their own choices about book resourcing and library provision. **DCMS** is monitoring the changes to libraries across England, under its statutory obligation to provide a "comprehensive and efficient" library service.

***Recommendation 8: In a world of constant policy change it is vital that teachers have access to good quality professional development (CPD).***

**DfE** stated that "the most successful education systems are characterised by strong systems of professional development, high levels of lesson observation and ongoing performance management". However, it did not believe that re-certification was necessary, seeing it as unnecessary bureaucratic burden which would not lead to high-quality CPD. The Government intends its teaching schools and review of teachers' standards to provide greater incentives for CPD.

***Recommendation 9: Ministers need to make clearer statements about the value of all aspects of literacy and communication, not just phonics.***

Emma Plackett, of **Reading Revival**, described how her local MP had recommended a trial of Reading Revival to the Schools Minister, but that the proposal was rejected despite its high success rate because it did not advocate the use of synthetic phonics at the first stage of learning to read.

**Voice** also cited the view of a teacher, asked about the phonics test: "If we didn't know where the children were with their reading we wouldn't be doing our job. We don't need this to tell us". The union has also stated that:

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Although phonics – pure sound – is often the best way to teach children to read effectively, there are some children – particularly those with special needs – for whom phonics is not successful. Not all children learn to read in the same way and the good teacher needs a variety of methods in order to meet the needs of every child. The Government is only ‘promoting’ the use of phonics in schools yet wants to test all pupils on them.

**Graham Parker, Senior Adviser for English at North Yorkshire County Council**, endorsed the need to consider elements above and beyond reading in improving a child’s overall level of communication. He said that it would perhaps be useful, however, if the APPG examined the “importance of developing and valuing speaking and listening” in more detail, since the development of verbal communication skills and the valuing of such skills would improve children’s ability to understand and write, without which “literacy cannot progress.” He stated that this had been stressed in Ofsted reports on literacy, but had yet to be examined in sufficient detail considering that it is an idea of such importance.

However, **John Bald**, education consultant, stated that the inquiry report should have consulted research and reports including those of M Macmartin (*Factors affecting reading comprehension in primary pupils* 1992), and E Schatz and R Baldwin (“Context cues are unreliable predictors of word meanings”, *Reading Research Quarterly* 1986). He states that often, “the context is composed of more words, which the person needs to be able to read if they are to use the context”, and that phonics should be the main element of teaching with “knowledge and understanding of irregular patterns, taught alongside”.

The **DfE** emphasised that the focus on systematic synthetic phonics was intended to ensure all children can read by the time they leave primary school.

**Recommendation 10: It is important that the Department for Education works more closely with other government departments.**

The **DfE** stated that it was taking a number of steps with other Government departments to improve outcomes for looked after children (including the pupil premium and clarifying local authorities’ duties). The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning (ASCL) Act 2009 mandates that local authorities must assess a detained young person’s literacy and numeracy as soon as possible.

**John Hayes MP, Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning**, noted that the **Department for Business, Innovation and Skills** identified the improvement of literacy levels as key for economic growth, and highlighted the Department’s funding of adult literacy and numeracy courses as well as its review to make delivery of such provision more effective.

**Andrew Lansley MP, Secretary of State for Health**, stated that health visitors were trained to identify early issues, such as visual and speech problems, that could affect literacy levels. The Healthy Child Programme (from 5-19) recommends that all children are screened for visual impairment via a health assessment at school entry.

**Crispin Blunt MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice**, acknowledged the research linking “an illiterate population and levels of crime”, and the “effect that lack of such skills [as literacy] can have on individuals’ life chances and their future offending behaviour”. Literacy and numeracy should consequently be addressed early on in the sentence, with a similar focus on vocational skills in the run-up to release, while the ASCL Act 2009 gives young people in custody the same entitlement to education as young people in the mainstream.

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