

Independent review of the teaching of early reading

Final Report, Jim Rose, March 2006

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Dear Secretary of State,

This is the final report of the Reading Review, which you invited me to undertake in June 2005. It builds on the interim report that was published on 1st December 2005.

In fulfilling its remit, the Review has drawn upon three main sources of information: the findings of research and inspection; wide-ranging consultation, including practitioners, teachers, trainers, resource providers and policy makers, and visits to settings, schools and training events.


It is no surprise to find that the main ingredients for success in the teaching of beginner readers are: a well trained teaching force; well designed, systematic programmes of work that are implemented thoroughly; incisive assessment of teaching and learning, and strong, supportive leadership.

At best, our settings and schools draw upon these factors and embody the principles of high quality phonic work within a language-rich curriculum that gives rise to high standards of reading and writing. It follows that the challenge now is to ensure that, in all settings and schools, the teaching and learning of early reading and writing in general, and phonic work in particular, measure up to this best practice.

As with the interim report, this report marshals findings and comments under the aspects set out in the remit for the Review. Given the nature of the task, it is hardly surprising that genuinely held views differed, sometimes widely, about aspects of the remit. However, all respondents united around the aim of securing reading as an entitlement for every child. I hope that the findings and outcomes of the Review will inform the means to that end.

I wish to thank the many respondents, including those who have contributed so helpfully to visits by the Review. I am also grateful to the advisory group and Ofsted for their valuable contributions and to my support team whose application and hard work throughout the exercise have been quite outstanding.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jim Rose". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jim Rose CBE

Summary

Over the first nine years of the National Curriculum (1989 to 1998) very little impact was made on raising standards of reading. Despite the content of phonic work being a statutory component of the National Curriculum over that time, reports from Her Majesty's Inspectors show that it was often a neglected or a weak feature of the teaching. That changed markedly with the advent of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998. The Strategy engaged schools in developing a structured teaching programme of literacy that included not only what phonic content should be taught but also how to teach it, with a subsequent rise in standards.

The forthcoming Early Years Foundation Stage and the renewal of the Primary National Strategy framework for teaching literacy provide powerful opportunities to reinvigorate and build upon these achievements and greatly reduce arbitrary boundaries between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, without compromising the hard won, distinctive merits of the areas of learning and experience in the early years.

In so doing, the new Early Years Foundation Stage and the renewed framework should make sure that best practice for beginner readers provides them with a rich curriculum that fosters all four interdependent strands of language: speaking, listening, reading and writing. The indications are that far more attention needs to be given, right from the

start, to promoting speaking and listening skills to make sure that children build a good stock of words, learn to listen attentively and speak clearly and confidently. Speaking and listening, together with reading and writing, are prime communication skills that are central to children's intellectual, social and emotional development. All these skills are drawn upon and promoted by high quality, systematic phonic work.

Engaging young children in interesting and worthwhile pre-reading activities paves the way for the great majority to make a good start on systematic phonic work by the age of five. Indeed, for some, an earlier start may be possible and desirable. This is because it ill serves children to hold them back from starting systematic phonic work that is matched to their developing abilities and enables them to benefit from the wealth of opportunities afforded by reading from an early age. All that said, the introduction of phonic work should always be a matter for principled, professional judgement based on structured observations and assessments of children's capabilities.

The term 'formal' in the pejorative sense in which phonic work is sometimes perceived in early education is by no means a fair reflection of the active, multi-sensory practice seen and advocated by the review for starting young children on the road to reading.

Despite uncertainties in research findings, the practice seen by the review shows that the systematic approach, which is generally understood as 'synthetic' phonics, offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers. When thinking about phonic work, what most people have in mind is the teaching and learning of reading. However, phonic work is also essential for the development of writing, especially spelling. The teaching of beginners must lead them to understand how reading and writing are related.

It is widely agreed that reading involves far more than decoding words on the page. Nevertheless, words must be decoded if readers are to make sense of the text. Phonic work is therefore a necessary but not sufficient part of the wider knowledge, skills and understanding which children need to become skilled readers and writers, capable of comprehending and composing text. For beginner readers, learning the core principles of phonic work in discrete daily sessions reduces the risk, attendant with the so-called 'searchlights' model, of paying too little attention to securing word recognition skills. In consequence, the review suggests a reconstruction of the searchlights model for reading.

Notwithstanding differences in presentation and aspects of content, well designed programmes, including those from commercial sectors, for teaching and learning phonics systematically, tend to converge around a small number of core

principles. It is implementing the principles which define high quality phonic work that should engage settings and schools, rather than debating entrenched views about less important aspects of phonics teaching.

Obviously, developing children's positive attitudes to literacy, in the broadest sense, from the earliest stage is very important. In the best circumstances, parents and carers, along with settings and schools, do much to foster these attitudes. For example, they stimulate children's early interest in literacy by exploiting play, story, songs and rhymes and provide lots of opportunities, and time, to talk with children about their experiences and feelings. For the youngest children, well before the age of five, sharing and enjoying favourite books regularly with trusted adults, be they parents, carers, practitioners or teachers, is at the heart of this activity. Parents and carers should be strongly encouraged in these pursuits and reassured that, in so doing, they are contributing massively to children's literacy and to their education in general.

However, there are significant numbers of children who, for one reason or another, do not start with these advantages. Some children also have neuro-developmental disorders and other special educational needs that may present formidable obstacles to learning to read and write. Providing effectively for all such children is an ever-present challenge that is being met with different degrees of success by various intervention programmes. The leading edge interventions and associated training

observed in the time available for the review were very good indeed and should continue to be exemplified in guidance to show how the best provision and practice are matched to different types of special educational needs.

It is important for schools to offer a coherent reading programme in which 'quality first teaching' as defined by the Primary National Strategy and intervention work are closely linked. While interventions for children with reading difficulties will always be necessary, the need for them is likely to be much reduced by 'quality first teaching'. This is because such teaching identifies incipient reading difficulties and this enables appropriate support to be provided quickly, thus minimising the risk of children falling behind. It follows that investment in 'quality first teaching' not only brings greatest benefit to children, but is also likely to yield the greatest value for money.

It is hardly surprising that training to equip those who are responsible for beginner readers with a good understanding of the core principles and skills of teaching phonic work, including those responsible for intervention programmes, has emerged as a critical issue. Not all the training considered by this review was of a quality that is likely to achieve these ends. In short, the quality of training for phonic work is patchy and requires urgent attention. While these observations apply largely to in-service training, reports from newly qualified teachers and practitioners suggest that there is room for improvement in these

respects in initial training.

As with most other aspects of the curriculum, a distinction needs to be made between teaching content and its delivery in the case of phonic work. While such work, from the standpoint of those who teach beginner readers, may not be 'rocket science', it does require practitioners and teachers to have a detailed knowledge and understanding of its teaching content so that they can plan and implement a high quality programme. Imaginative and skilful teaching that engages and motivates children does not happen by chance: it relies upon well trained adults, who are skilled in observing and assessing children's learning, good planning and preparation. The maxim 'plan, do, review' from early years education holds true for phonic work. Headteachers and school governors should ensure that this process informs the setting of realistic and ambitious targets for English.

The review, therefore, highlights the importance of training at all levels. It provides a timely opportunity to consider how to strengthen training to secure competencies that are of direct benefit to the learners, their settings and schools. Making sure that the benefits of training are exploited fully and provide value for money is an obvious priority for those in positions of leadership.

Importantly, these findings show that we have a workforce of practitioners, teachers and support staff who are more than capable, with appropriate support and

training, of meeting the recommendations of this review. In addition we have a well established infrastructure for training and development programmes. The findings also strongly suggest that our settings and schools have at least sufficient and often good material resources for teaching reading, including phonic work.

The review, therefore, not only suggests ways forward and pinpoints areas where change is called for, it also endorses those which are worthwhile and should be sustained in existing provision. These include support for children learning English as an

additional language, and those with special educational needs: areas which already benefit from sound guidance from national policies and strategies. Within the scope of the remit, the review refers to, and commends, such guidance rather than seeking to reinvent it.

In consequence, the issues underlying the recommendations of the review are very largely to do with building quality rather than capacity. Improving the quality of what is already in place rather than introducing lots of new elements is likely to yield the greatest benefits for beginner readers.