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A REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE UK NATIONAL LITERACY CURRICULUM

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Abstract

In recent years, the UK government has made a number of changes to how children aged five and above are taught to read. These changes have sparked ongoing debate among teachers, academics, parents, and the wider public about what the most effective approach to early literacy should be. Media attention has only added to the intensity of the discussion, showing how important and relevant this issue is to society.

Keywords: *Curriculum Design, Educational Pedagogy, Synthetic Phonics, National Literacy Curriculum*

Introduction

For us, the question of how children learn to read is directly linked to our everyday work. We teach five-year-olds who are just beginning their reading journey, and this can be especially challenging in our school context. Most of our pupils speak English as a second language and often receive little or no support at home, since many parents have not had formal schooling in English themselves. These challenges make the classroom approach to reading even more crucial.

In this essay, we will look at the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), examining how it was developed, how it has changed over time, and what its impact has been on helping children become successful readers. The National Literacy Trust and other key sources have been particularly valuable in tracing the background to these policies and un-

derstanding their role in shaping classroom practice today.

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS), new government policy

Looking at the background to the National Literacy Strategy framework. Particularly looking at why it was created would put the NLS into context and explain its reasons for development. The National Literacy Trust website, which we mentioned earlier, is an official site setup to give clear information on what is happening in the country as far as literacy is concerned. It also captures the mood or reaction to a literacy policy accurately and keeps the site impartial by voicing opinions from different national newspapers, views of politicians and teachers. This is why it would be a good place to begin research into the background of the strategy.

The question arises why do we need literacy? And as Hempenstall (1997) states that literacy is highly valued in a democratic technological society such as ours.

Hence, why during the late 1990's particularly, between 1995–1997 the National Literacy Trust surveyed educational authorities to establish how they were trying to improve literacy standards in schools. The survey actually found that the Local Education Authorities (LEA's) were actually already looking to improve standards by starting a literacy hour.

Accordingly, the government then introduced the new National Literacy Strategy in 1998. This strategy focused primarily on raising literacy standards for all primary aged children. The new strategy framework included the literacy hour, which would then take place on a regular and daily basis. The literacy hour included various components e.g. looking at words, sentences and texts equally. Particularly creating a balanced way of teaching where teachers could teach by having focused group sessions where whole class children could work individually (Hurry et al., 2022)

Consequently, once the white paper was passed, the new National Literacy Strategy project was then extended to all schools in England. The literacy hour was then implemented fully on September 1998.

The structure of the literacy hour for the first time was a direct intervention in a classroom as to how teachers teach children to read and write with the main focus being on phonics. Furthermore, it was structured termly so that it was almost as if teachers were being dictated on how to teach children to read and write but, were not given a specific method as such to follow.

The purpose of the NLS at the time was to extend children's vocabulary, encourage reading in children, particularly reading together. Further emphasis being on grammar with spelling, however, the focus became phonics as the NLS developed further.

Phonics

In the above section there is a mention of phonics a few times. According to the Wikipedia website **phonics** is essentially described as the study of the way in which spelling represents sounds that make up the words. In reading children are taught the sounds of the

letter and how those sounds combine to form words.

Essentially phonics is divided into two types. The first type is called **analytic phonics** or **whole-language** or the **whole-to-part** approach. This method of phonics is based on hearing the full word then breaking down and segmenting the word. This type of phonics teaching was particularly popular in the 1970's. Children were taught to spell by a method of using primers and graded workbook in favour of the whole language approach (Synthetic-Phonics Website, 2007).

Smith (1992) makes the point in favour of the whole language method by arguing that this approach is more natural for children; that eventually whole word recognition follows once fully understood. A continuing point is made that learning to read this way depends on sight, shape and length of the word. With other cues such as pictures and word in context to reveal its identity.

The argument to the above statement would be that this is a highly complex process and is far too advanced for children who are just being introduced to reading. In fact, this sort of skill of deducing sounds, etc., is what advanced readers would do, and it also heavily relies on memory and the whole idea of rote learning is introduced.

It is interesting that the synthetic-phonics website (2007) argues that the whole-language approach actually caused primary school students' reading scores to fall about 14 percent over the next 15 years.

The second type of phonics method is called **synthetic phonics** or what is simply known as **phonics** or **part-to-whole**. According to the Reading Reform Foundation, it consists of synthesising, blending or combining the sounds together to enable children to begin reading the whole word.

An example from what we do at work is for instance the word *sat*, when broken down is *s-a-t*. Each letter has its own action, which the children learn through repetition. Once the children learn the sound of each letter, then they blend them together to say *sat*. This method on the other hand has its own limitations; the limitations are particularly evident with words like *the* or *I* which are never broken down. Also, the English language does not have a one-to-one spell-

ing and sound mapping system. This causes problems to children – however, synthetic phonics does allow children to work out the sounds and words for themselves. Synthetic phonics is often described as a “Back to Basics” approach (Curtis, 1.12.2005).

The Guardian article goes on to argue that synthetic phonics was the dominant method of teaching children to read in the 1960’s but was unfortunately replaced by the whole-language approach and became popular in the 1970’s. This approach to teaching children to read was based on rote learning rather than familiarising children with the alphabet.

The National Literacy Strategy, reformed government policy.

It was very important to discuss the terminology in the previous section before moving on to discussing the National Literacy Strategy further.

According to the British Library website, the 1999 Ofsted report evaluated the first year of the National Literacy Strategy (first launched in 1998) and found that phonic teaching was weak in a quarter of lessons even though Reception teachers were performing well.

By the fourth year of the National Literacy Strategy, the 2002 Ofsted suggested a failed attempt at raising standards in literacy. The poor outcome was due to lack of training and instruction of how to teach reading using the phonics method. A further criticism was the fact that a new reading system was introduced without it being piloted first (NLT website, 2006).

However, in 1998 before the national literacy became official a previous 7-year study was carried out in Clackmannanshire, Scotland (Curtis 1.12.2005). The study was to determine the effectiveness of synthetic phonics. In their study they found that the 113 children were taught by using phonics, soon after starting school. By the end of the 16-week programme, they were reading seven months ahead of the Schonell test (word reading test). Furthermore, the children taught to read by synthetic phonics were 3 years ahead of their age group (Reading Reform Foundation website, 2007).

Furthermore, the study found that the group of children being taught phonics using

the analytic method were unsuccessful after two terms of teaching. It was also found that both boys and girls were doing well, even though the girls were 2 months ahead in spelling. However, there was no difference in overall reading ability in relation to whether the children had learnt the synthetic phonics method early or late in their first year at school. Some of the children who had learnt synthetic phonics late had to have extra help during the course of the second year. Nonetheless, in conclusion to the study, the early synthetic phonics-taught children were found to be significantly better at spelling (RRF website, 2007). In addition, the synthetic method laid strong foundations for children to use the sounding and blending skills to decode and read unfamiliar words.

It is interesting to note that the government still thought that after a 7-year study into synthetic phonics, that the method was not piloted properly, and used this excuse to explain the failure of literacy standards. Perhaps this failure occurred because of unclear objectives.

In November 2003 a new document came into force concentrating on speaking, listening and learning. This document was particularly focused on children in Key Stages 1 and 2. It was not particularly aimed at children entering school. However, this document enhanced the literacy framework by having clear learning objectives and points of focus were specifically on speaking and listening after children had failed the literacy targets set for 2002 (NLT website, 2007).

As a result of this failed attempt at improving literacy standards there were further steps towards improving reading standards, the next expected process of learning from previous mistakes was to push further forward the idea of phonics, particularly synthetic phonics and bring it to the forefront as a means to teaching children to read.

The Rose Report

The Rose report which was officially known as the Independent Review of teaching of Early Reading was a British government report published stating that synthetic phonics should be the prime approach that was inclusive to all children, especially those facing reading challenges such as dyslex-

ia. This approach was not without its criticism, many arguing that it was too narrow and not fully researched with sufficient long term comprehensive data to support this approach. However, there was a concerted effort at that time to change the pedagogy of teaching reading. The press association in the Guardian Unlimited (30.9.2005) states that according to the heads of the Government Literacy Review Agency, schools needed to take urgent action to improve the way children were being taught to read; this action was needed in response to the criticism of the first four years of the National Literacy Strategy.

Jim Rose was a former director of inspection and carried out an independent review; his main concern with literacy was the fact that one in five children left primary schools in England unable to read or write properly. He further felt that there was no consistency in the teaching, and that the teaching varied greatly throughout the country and that there was a considerable variation in quality of teaching. He further made the point that the government needed to make sure that primary schools were providing high levels of teaching. He argued that assuring quality of teaching is more important and far more difficult to maintain (Guardian, 30.9.2005).

The independent review was further published in March 2006, and the main features being that systematic phonics would begin at the age of five, with this being embedded in the curriculum, with a high emphasis on pre-reading skills. His report emphasised the need for speaking, listening, reading and writing skills to be developed by word recognition and language comprehension as distinct processes (NLT, 2007). However, the underlying feel to the review was the heavy use of synthetic phonics as a foundation to all the four skills as mentioned.

Smithers, the education editor in the Guardian (2.12.2005) writes that the dynamic re-vamp of the existing literacy strategy shows a change in government policy, whereas before synthetic phonics could be taught alongside other methods, now it has emerged as the focus of teaching children to read.

Jim Rose himself suggested that every other reading method should be sidelined and synthetic phonics should be systemati-

cally used. Furthermore, Ruth Kelly the education secretary backed the Rose reports and its findings. She admitted that the government had not done enough to raise standards of reading (Guardian 2.12.2005).

Thus, following the final publication of the Rose Report the synthetic phonic system came into force September 2006 as a way to address literacy standards. Moreover, in December 2006 an interim review further concluded that synthetic phonics should be enforced in the national curriculum (Guardian 20.3.2006).

Teachers

The process of policy change is usually top-down and often teachers are overlooked when compiling and implementing new school related policy is undertaken, as then the teacher's role changes from that of teacher to a technician. Furthermore, from experience we feel that success of any given educational policy depends on the ability of each individual child and what he or she can achieve; it also depends on how much of a consistent input a child receives.

Hempenstall (1997) states that phonics is really a way of sensitising children to the relationship between spelling and patterns of writing. This is in relation to both sound and oral language. She further makes the point that all this cannot be achieved by a single method and timing is crucial as to when children are introduced to this and where they are in their development. Another crucial factor is the form of delivery; the delivery can have an impact on how children choose to learn.

Ford (2.2.2006) who is a specialist in early years education wrote an article that appeared in the Guardian criticising the fact that children under the age of 5 are being pushed to start reading using synthetic phonics. That in actual fact reading should begin in year 1. She goes as far as arguing that teaching children who are so young purely through phonics is in fact harmful. She also says that children should be given the opportunities to explore language via stories, songs, and poetry so that they appreciate language.

It would seem that majority of teachers want children to have a lifelong fondness of reading. However, some argue that all

this phonics teaching affects the comprehension skills of children. Where they stop associating meaning to words and just read them as words (Guardian, 2.12.2005)

Wasik (1998) states that before children start to read they need to have a strong basis in phonemic awareness (a phoneme is the smallest unit of speech e.g. *Sat* has three phonemes; each letter sound may change depending on the sounds around them). She argues that phonemic awareness is paramount before phonics understanding begins to take place. This awareness is developed through rich language opportunities through play. This way they get the opportunity to manipulate sounds and different words. She emphasises that there is a strong link between manipulation of sounds and learning to read.

Other teachers feel that the so-called 'reading wars' are just what politicians do to swing votes because literacy is a key issue in the country. That really politicians do not have any real insight and understanding as to what goes on in a classroom.

Personally, we feel that this synthetic phonics reading method will predominate in classrooms as the government is putting considerable funding into promoting this method of reading. Historically, there have been many successful, and not so successful, teacher-training and staff-training initiatives created to get people to change their method of teaching children to read (Carbo, 1996).

Using both methods to teach reading

In a Guardian article (12.2.2005), the same concerns were voiced as mentioned in the previous section that teacher leaders questioned the government's decision to rely on just the one method. Reutzel (Dec 1998/ Jan 1999) argues that there needs to be balanced reading, which consists of a combination of phonics and whole-language method.

Carbo (1996) writes that teachers are always expected to achieve wonders when teaching children to read. However, in reality some children learn to read by phonics and others do not. She further argues that teaching using one method is not advisable. In her extensive research experience, teaching children to read really depends on the

individual child and their own reading style. She says different reading styles take place in a single classroom anyway, so why change a practice which already works. Carbo (1996) makes the point that serious problems can arise when children cannot hear the different sounds and thus cannot associate the sounds with the corresponding letters, regardless of the exact method implemented.

Conclusion

In conclusion we feel that there is a need to drive up standards of reading and frameworks such as the National Literacy Strategy as it helps to organise and regulate what is going on in the country and how reading is progressing. In the reading that we have done for this issue, it is interesting that a lot of the literature promotes the method or reading style which aligns with the predominating political agenda of the time. For example, literature, which is published in the 1990's or earlier, promotes the whole language method. Literature that is more current promotes the synthetic phonics method as the best way to teach to reading.

From our own experience working with children who are starting to read, they need a mixture of different methods to get them interested and engaged. The different methods promote variety in learning for children and make learning enjoyable to them; children are not rigidly set in their ways of learning at such a young age, so variation allows them the opportunity to explore learning further, not just in reading, but other skills like speaking, listening and writing (Robb, 2025).

The Rose report definitely sent waves through the early year stages in primary schools. Indeed, in our work place the use of synthetic phonics is rigorously in use and, to be fair, we do see an improvement in the children's learning, as opposed to previous years where phonics was more scattered and not as systematically focused.

Reading styles, it would seem are linked covertly to the government in power and all the policy targets they set. We believe there will be continuing changes and debates on reading as and when new governments change power.

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