



Editorial - May 2006

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News and comment from the Editor.

What/wot/watt is the right/rite/write way/weigh/whey to teach reading/reeding? Well, now it's official. <!--break-->Following a nine month enquiry and review conducted by the former director of inspections at Ofsted, Jim Rose, primary schools will be required by law to teach children to read using the synthetic phonics approach* from September. Education Secretary Ruth Kelly is quoted in **The Times Educational Supplement** (24.3.06) as saying: 'I am clear that synthetic phonics should be the first strategy in teaching children to read.' Lord Adonis, education minister, adds: 'I think teachers will welcome this because it brings greater clarity in teaching of reading. Being prescriptive about what is right is not a mistake.'

Unfortunately quite a lot of educationalists disagree both about whether the synthetic phonics approach is right and whether its use should be prescribed. President of the United Kingdom Literacy Association Dr Jackie Marsh, for example, writes in the Guardian (3.12.05): 'A balanced combination of synthetic and analytic approaches has been the method employed successfully in England for some years.' Dr Marsh points to research that shows that while English children are some of the most competent readers in the world after Sweden and the Netherlands, many English children do not read for pleasure. She concludes that 'the teaching of phonics needs to be only one element of a rich and varied reading curriculum'. Professor Emeritus of Literacy in Primary Education at the University of Brighton, Henrietta Dombey, writes in the January edition of this journal*: 'To become effective and enthusiastic readers, our children need both synthetic and analytic phonics, together with teaching in making sense of written language.' She adds, and this is a key point: 'But they also need highly skilled and committed teachers, with plenty of material and moral support, and also a healthy respect for the children they are teaching and the communities they come from. Recent studies have shown that the implementation (my ital.) makes a bigger difference than the sequence and composition of activities in a programme.'

It is hardly surprising that the Clackmannanshire experiment produced good results as its implementation was being both well supported and monitored. When synthetic phonics are imposed across the board, however, what kind of extra help will be available and will there really be time for the plays, stories, songs, rhymes and drama declared to be 'vital' to becoming not just a skilled reader but a keen one?

* **Books for Keeps** No.156, January '06. Professor Dombey's article provides a clear explanation of the different phonic approaches.



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