

# Teaching Reading: *What the evidence says*

Henrietta Dombey and colleagues  
in the United Kingdom Literacy Association

Foreword by Michael Rosen

# UKLA

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**The United Kingdom Literacy Association** is an independent professional association dedicated to literacy development with the sole aim of promoting literacy education. Its membership consists of practising teachers, teacher educators and academic researchers. It supports research in literacy education through grants for small projects, and convenes conferences at international, national and regional levels, which feature international literacy scholars, literacy educators, researchers, authors and publishers. It publishes two refereed journals - *Journal of Research in Reading* and *Literacy* - both of which have international advisory boards including many of the most senior scholars on reading in the world. Both journals provide balanced and informed studies of theory and practice in literacy education in a variety of settings, especially school classrooms.

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## Teaching Reading: *What the evidence says*

**UKLA argues for an evidence-informed  
approach to teaching and testing  
young children's reading.**

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**Foreword by Michael Rosen**

## Foreword

### Contents

Foreword by Michael Rosen	1
1 Is there a reading problem in England?	3
2 An evidence-informed approach	4
3 Evidence from really successful schools	5
4 Cutting the link between parental income and reading success	9
5 Lessons from other countries	12
6 What does it all add up to?	13
References	14

### How should decisions about education be made?

At first glance, there's an obvious answer to this question: on the basis of experience and evidence. Thousands of teachers work every day with hundreds of thousands of pupils. Thousands of hours of educational research are spent looking at how teachers teach, how learners learn. Surely, the job of ministers of education is to find ways of synthesising all this and, within the constraints of funding, to turn it into policy.

*Ab! if only.*

In fact, what takes place is that ministers do something quite different. By and large, they don't listen to teachers and they don't look at research - particularly if it's research about how children learn. Instead, they look for 'favourites', experts whose views correspond with their party's philosophy-of-the-moment. At such times, many of the usual requirements and stipulations of educational research go flying out of the window. So, what gets dispensed with is the rigour of demanding that:

- all research making comparisons between two sets of pupils, compares 'like with like', in terms of age and range of ability, in terms of race, gender and class, in terms of linguistic background;
- samples of pupils being exposed to a specific new programme of teaching are compared to a 'control group' whose education is as near as possible going on under the same conditions as the sample group, bar the specific new programme of teaching (keeping the variables constant);
- any conclusions about the consequences following a new programme of teaching should be short-term, medium-term and long-term (and not just one of these);
- every effort should be made to make the testing of the consequences as multi-dimensional as possible and not restricted to one simple quantitative test of one aspect of the skill concerned.

Sadly, the moment we're at, as regards the question of learning to read, is that decisions have been made over the last few years where, yes, there has been research, but one or more of the above conditions have been dropped; and the long term consequences of the 'specific new programme of teaching' have not been considered.

So we've seen ministers of all political shades appearing at their respective party conferences announcing that all children will now learn how to read using 'phonics' as if that were the beginning and end of the story.

Whichever way you look at this, there are problems:

1. English is not written in a consistently 'phonic' way, so learning to read phonically will never teach a child how to read everything.
2. Reading phonically, is not the same as reading. That's to say, we read because it either gives us pleasure or because there is something we want to know. In other words we read for the meaning.
3. The question of whether phonics works as a teaching tool cannot be proved if research methods are faulty or inadequate.
4. There is a huge body of experience and research which tells us that children are very diverse in terms of personality and in terms of what kinds of linguistic and emotional expertise they bring to the classroom where they are learning how to read. They cannot be given a one-size-suits- all approach.
5. There is a huge body of experience and research that shows us that if we want long term, long lasting results from teaching children how to read, we have to consider many varied kinds of activities in relation to the written language.

This booklet is a concise argument for the alternative way. It uses and refers us to the very latest research. It weighs up the drawbacks of putting all our literacy eggs into the phonics basket. It provides an argument for reading at every stage - initial, developing and fluent - to be fun, interesting and engaging. It is a plea for government to listen and think again.

It deserves to be on every minister's desk, in every inspector's folder, on every primary school noticeboard, in every education journal.

**Michael Rosen**  
**October 2010**

## **Teaching Reading:** ***What the evidence says***

### **1 Is there a reading problem in England?**

Education is high on the political agenda again. Literacy education is exciting particular passion in government statements and elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. After more than ten years of the constraints of the National Literacy Strategy framework and high stakes accountability, patrolled by SATs and Ofsted, despite teachers' best efforts, England's primary children seem to be sliding down the international rankings<sup>2</sup>. The evidence suggests that ten-year-olds in other countries, such as Russia and Germany, are forging ahead of children in England. The most recent international figures (from tests in 2006) show England's ten-year-olds in 15th place out of 40 countries on a test of reading competence, down from 3rd out of 36 five years earlier.

The situation of children from the poorest families is most acute. UKLA shares the government's concern to 'make opportunity more equal'<sup>3</sup>. Children from low-income groups in England do particularly poorly on reading tests: literacy scores in England are far too closely tied to socio-economic status. Despite the dramatic success of particular projects, in general England compares poorly with other countries in this respect<sup>4</sup>.

So action needs to be taken. But should this mean more phonics? UKLA considers that the evidence indicates that a heavy dose of phonics will not bring our children back into the international running.

<sup>1</sup> Gibb, N. (1.7.2010) ; Gross, M. (2010)

<sup>2</sup> Twist et al.,(2003, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Gove, M. (2010)

<sup>4</sup> Blanden, Gregg and Machin (2005)

## 2 An evidence-informed approach

To remedy our children's low international standing and to make opportunity more equal, we need to draw on the best research evidence of what works in classrooms. We need to ensure that England's education policy is informed by a dispassionate evaluation of sound research, not distorted by anecdotal reports or partial accounts of questionable studies.

### Learning to read means learning to make sense of text

We also need to ensure that our central concern is with learning to read for meaning. Reading is not just pronouncing written words. Children who become avid and accomplished readers focus on making sense from the start: they develop a habit of mind that expects the words they decode to make sense. This allows them to monitor their own performance from an early stage, and to make corrections when they misread.

### Clackmannanshire?

Both the current Coalition and recent Labour governments have relied heavily on the research of Johnson and Watson in Clackmannanshire<sup>5</sup>. Yet this research has been seriously challenged<sup>6</sup>. This intervention, focused principally on the systematic teaching of 'synthetic phonics', showed dramatic gains for reading individual words, but much smaller gains for comprehension. The intervention has left the Local Authority with below average scores on Scotland's national reading tests. Her Majesty's Inspectorate has remarked on Clackmannanshire's low performance, when compared with Local Authorities with a similar socio-economic profile<sup>7</sup>. It makes no sense to direct all England's primary schools up the Clackmannanshire cul-de-sac.

<sup>5</sup> Johnston and Watson (2004, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> Wyse and Styles (2007)

<sup>7</sup> HMIE (2006)

<sup>8</sup> Anderson et al. (1988)

<sup>9</sup> Taylor and Pearson (2002, p.365)

<sup>10</sup> Medwell et al., 1998; Pressley et al. (2001)

<sup>11</sup> Guthrie et al. (1996); Cunningham and Stanovich (1998)

## 3 Evidence from really successful schools

Policy makers should encourage headteachers to learn from the schools that are particularly successful in teaching children to read. By this we mean schools where children not only demonstrate a high degree of competence, but also show that they actually like reading and do plenty of it. Children who read more enter a virtuous cycle: they become even more competent at reading and develop larger vocabularies and a greater understanding of the world<sup>8</sup>.

Studies of schools and classrooms where children are taught to read most effectively show consistently that high achieving classes are characterized by:

- *a balanced approach* in which attention to word recognition skills is matched by attention to comprehension "with the consistent message that understanding and effective communication - not just word recognition - are what literacy is about"<sup>9</sup>;
- attention to individual children's literacy skills, experiences and interests through high quality interaction and close monitoring of individual progress<sup>10</sup>;
- high levels of engagement in reading<sup>11</sup>.

### Balance

A balanced approach means that, as well as working to master the mechanics of reading that allow them to lift the words off the page, children are encouraged and supported to focus on making sense of written text, and to see its uses in ordering, enlarging, enjoying and making sense of their lives. It means ensuring that classrooms are filled with interesting written texts - on screen as well as on paper - and that children are given rich experiences of putting these texts to use.

### Attention to individual children's literacy skills, experiences and interests

Literacy teaching is most effective when it is closely matched to the needs of the learner. No class can move forward in lock-step: effective teachers construct and interpret programmes of work in ways that allow quicker learners to move ahead and slower learners to address their problems.

### ***Bishop's Road, a large primary school in Bristol***

*The children learn phonics and spelling rigorously from reception onwards whilst being immersed in an extensive range of situations that involve reading for meaning. They enjoy English lessons based round fiction or non-fiction texts, which they use to explore a wide range of issues. SEN pupils are supported in accessing the same texts as their peers, developing a sophisticated vocabulary and internalizing the rhythmic patterns of written language. Pupils develop tenacity and perseverance through reading challenging books and with the ability to write with genuine quality.*

*The children enjoy regular read aloud sessions and choose books to read themselves from a wide range in the class collections or the extensive school library. Gifted and talented children compare and contrast a range of books by the same author seeking inter-textuality and themes.*

*Staff choose high quality multi-layered picture books to allow children to link themes and powerful narratives to their own experience. History, RE and Science are all researched through texts and study skills are prioritised.*

*Staff training is substantial and sustained and this combination of high expectation, rigour and creativity resulted in 99% of the Year 2 children achieving Level 2 or above in 2010, while 96% of the Year 6 children gained Level 4 or above, with 63% achieving Level 5.*

Effective teachers maximize children's learning potential through responding to their interests and experiences<sup>12</sup>. They recognize and value the language and literacy that children bring to school, even where these differ markedly from their own experiences. This welcome is extended to the very many children who arrive at school speaking another language, perhaps able to read in another writing system. Recognizing and building on these children's strengths in language and literacy helps them to make progress in spoken and written English. A 'one size fits all' approach does not address the wider challenges of increasing diversity in children's lives beyond school<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Dyson (2003)

<sup>13</sup> Luke (1993); Comber and Kamler (2004)

### ***Churchfields an infant school in East London***

*This school, which has 37% of children with English as an Additional Language, consistently uses a mixed approach to teaching early reading, combining phonics teaching with giving a central place in the reading curriculum to CLPE's Power of Reading, an approach that emphasises the enjoyment of good quality children's books as the basis for reading, writing and talk in the classroom<sup>14</sup>.*

*The children are highly enthusiastic as readers and writers. Their SATs results have consistently shown very high standards of attainment. In 2010, 97 % of the Year 2 children attained Level 2 and above and 44% attained Level 3.*

### **Engagement**

Engagement is increasingly seen by researchers as central to progress in reading. After parental background, engagement (not addressed in the Clackmannanshire study) has the biggest effect on progress in reading<sup>15</sup>. Children who are engaged learn more from their classroom lessons. They also read more, inside and outside school. As they read more, they become better readers - better at recognizing the words and better at making sense of them. This means they learn more in other subjects.

Yet children in England score low on measures of attitudes to reading. In the PIRLS test carried out in 2006, England's ten-year-olds scored 23rd out of 29 countries tested, significantly worse than the English ten-year-olds had five years before<sup>16</sup>. To meet our goal of improving English children's standing worldwide, we must attend officially to their levels of engagement.

There are classrooms where children enthuse about the texts they are reading (boys as well as girls). Projects such as UKLA's *Building Communities of Readers*<sup>17</sup> have shown their effectiveness in refreshing teachers' and children's interest in children's literature and in the act of reading. With this re-vitalization come improved reading test scores. Such projects are not expendable luxuries, but critical to children's sustained success as readers.

<sup>14</sup> CLPE 2010

<sup>15</sup> Cunningham and Stanovich (1998)

<sup>16</sup> Twist et al (2007)

<sup>17</sup> Cremin et al. (2009)

## Reading in the digital age

Reading in the outside world is no longer confined to books. If they are to operate successfully out of school, children need to be helped to become effective and critical readers of multimodal text - of texts where the messages come through the visual images and the sounds as well as the written words. Working with such texts in school has been shown to increase engagement and improve comprehension of more conventional texts<sup>18</sup>.

## 4 Cutting the link between parental income and reading success

Meanwhile, in England, parental income is still too strongly related to children's educational attainment<sup>19</sup>. We need to cut this link, so that all children, no matter what their economic circumstances, learn to read, quickly and easily, and feel empowered by the experience.

### Pre-school help at home

To close the gap in reading achievement we must understand its causes more fully. One starting point is the recognition that the quality of children's home experience matters even more than parental income. The extent to which parents become involved in their children's education and are able to create a home environment that encourages learning and communicates high, yet reasonable, expectations for achievement and future careers, provides an even more accurate indicator of children's future academic success<sup>20</sup>. Of all school subjects, reading has been found to be most sensitive to parental influences<sup>21</sup>.

Intervention in children's out-of-school lives can make a difference: there is now evidence that the Sure Start programme has been effective in improving a range of child and family outcomes<sup>22</sup>.

### Reading out of school

While action in the early pre-school years is particularly effective, what happens outside school continues to matter as children grow older. A meta-analysis of 11 US studies shows that children living in poverty tend to slide back in terms of reading proficiency over the summer holidays, while those living in better circumstances continue to make progress<sup>23</sup>. But the simple expedient of giving them self-chosen books to read over the school break can make a marked difference<sup>24</sup>. UKLA's evaluation of the library-based holiday initiative, the Summer Reading Challenge presents a similar picture, of access to books associated with improved reading skill and increased motivation<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Gee (2004)

<sup>19</sup> Blanden, Gregg and Machin (2005)

<sup>20</sup> Sanders and Epstein (1998)

<sup>21</sup> Sénéchal and Lefevre (2002)

<sup>22</sup> National Evaluation of Sure Start (2008)

<sup>23</sup> Cooper et al. (1996)

<sup>24</sup> Allington (2010)

<sup>25</sup> Kennedy and Bearne (2009)

### Successful schools in areas of difficulty

Meanwhile, the challenge for schools is to value the knowledge and experience of literacy all children bring to school, to ensure that those most at risk are carefully monitored, to have high expectations, to teach the necessary technical knowledge about literacy while making the children fully aware of the joys of the written word and its relevance to their present and future lives<sup>26</sup>.

#### ***Starbank, a large primary school in Birmingham***

*The children in this school come from a rich and diverse cultural mix of families. 45% of them are eligible for free school meals. Many join the Nursery below the levels expected for their age in terms of communication, language and literacy skills. In school they play and learn in rich, interactive and stimulating learning environments where adult aspiration for the success of all is high. There is a strong emphasis on literacy and the whole school recognises the essential place of speaking and listening. Last year's Ofsted report declared: "The school knows exactly what to do on its journey to excellence".*

*The strength of Starbank's success in literacy comes from the breadth of its language and literacy curriculum. As well as the systematic phonics approach of Birmingham's Communication, Language and Literacy Development (CLLD) programme, the school is also involved in the Every Child a Reader (ECaR) programme, based on Marie Clay's Reading Recovery (RR). Three teachers are trained in RR, but elements of the approach are applied in all classes - rich book introductions, oral rehearsal of stories, a practice page for writing. When talking about the place of phonics in the literacy curriculum at Starbank, the ECaR tutor commented: "Well, it's a bit like Marie Clay wrote, you know, it's essential but not sufficient".*

*Parents observe ECaR lessons, which supports the school ethos and helps to build strong relationships. This broad and balanced approach has produced creditable results. This year 83.4% of the Year 2 children were awarded Level 2 or above in reading, while 82% of the Year 6 children gained Level 4 or above.*

Studies of schools in the US that have managed to overcome difficult circumstances have shown the importance of the following features:

- Small group instruction 'catch up' strategies that connect with ongoing classroom teaching and that offer opportunities for reading connected text<sup>27</sup>;
- 'Home grown' school catch-up programs that take account of reputable research findings<sup>28</sup>;
- 'Catch up' strategies that involve attention to making sense of text as well as to matters of word identification<sup>29</sup>.

An education policy that focuses clearly on reducing the link between family income and literacy levels will deliver the biggest payoff for children and for the nation. It must be bold and imaginative, addressing out-of-school as well as in-school provision. We need to ensure that all young people can engage with the full curriculum and emerge from the education system as confident, articulate and motivated to continue learning.

<sup>26</sup> Comber and Kamler (2004)

<sup>27</sup> Taylor et al. (2000); Allington (2001)

<sup>28</sup> Taylor et al. (2000)

<sup>29</sup> Taylor et al. (2000); Allington (2001); Taylor and Pearson (2002)

## 5 Lessons from other countries

### What we can learn from Finland

Finnish children are always near the top of any international survey of reading for which they are entered<sup>30</sup>. Finland also has the weakest link between parental income and reading attainment. So it's worth looking at Finnish schools. Finnish teachers have a high level of education (most have Master's degrees) and a high level of autonomy in the classroom. They are not closely directed, but make their own professional decisions, in consultation with their colleagues. The education system is also notable for a very low level of testing.

### A cautionary tale from the United States

In 2001 The US Senate passed the *No Child Left Behind* Act. This included the mandation of *Reading First*, a programme to remedy reading failure in low-achieving schools. This consisted of direct instruction in the 'essential components' of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension), taught as separate skills, to children in Grades 1, 2 and 3. Billions of dollars were spent on the programme, which involved nearly 6,000 schools. However, the official evaluation, which involved 128 schools on 18 sites in 12 states, found that its adoption brought no significant improvements to children's comprehension<sup>31</sup>. "On average, across the 18 participating sites, estimated impacts on student reading comprehension test scores were not statistically significant."<sup>32</sup> Congress has since eliminated further funding for the Reading First programme. Policy makers in the UK should avoid imposing similar programmes that do not sit well with what we know of effective literacy teaching and deny schools and teachers the autonomy they need to provide effectively for their pupils.

<sup>30</sup> OECD (2004, 2007)

<sup>31</sup> Gamse et al., (2008)

<sup>32</sup> Gamse et al., p. ix

## 6 What does it all add up to?

If we want England's children to get better at reading and to do more of it, we have to give them a diet that is attractive, nutritious and satisfying. Restricting them to an unbalanced diet, the thin gruel of a phonics-dominated approach, is a recipe for lowering standards and turning children against the written word. Where reading is in daily competition with the allure of digital gaming, on hand-held consoles and mobile telephones as well as computer screens, we have to work doubly hard to demonstrate its rewards. We cannot expect children to defer gratification until they have mastered the techniques. Children certainly need instruction in the techniques, but they only become effective and committed readers through reading texts that interest them.

Teachers who are over-directed are not best placed to develop such readers. Teachers need to be treated as professionals, encouraged to make professional decisions, rather than instructed in detail about what to teach, when and how.

### UKLA argues for:

- **an evidence-informed approach to early literacy teaching, with a focus on successful schools;**
- **Government recognition of the importance of teachers' professional autonomy in raising standards of reading;**
- **Government funding for programmes aimed to:**
  - **develop readers who are committed as well as capable;**
  - **cut the links between parental income and literacy attainment;**
  - **build on the knowledge and experience of language and literacy that all children bring to school.**

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# Teaching Reading: *What the evidence says*

Despite years of expensive government initiatives, England's children are doing less well than their counterparts in many other countries. Successive governments have called for simple answers to this complex problem, focusing on phonics as the highroad to literacy for all.

Yet there is now abundant evidence on both sides of the Atlantic that what actually works in the classroom is a more comprehensive, integrated and flexible approach. This booklet draws such evidence together in a readable form.

For more details of the United Kingdom Literacy Association see the association website at [www.ukla.org](http://www.ukla.org)

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