

**A WORLD FIRST
FOR WEST
DUNBARTONSHIRE**

THE ELIMINATION OF READING
FAILURE

Tom Burkard

THE AUTHOR

Tom Burkard is the Director of The Promethean Trust, a Norwich-based charity for dyslexic children. His main academic interest is the interface between reading theory and classroom practice, and he has written numerous articles for academic journals and the press. He contributed to the *Daily Telegraph Good Schools* guide, and in 2007 the University of Buckingham Press will be publishing a popular edition of his MA dissertation under the title *Suffer the Children*. He is the co-author of the Sound Foundations reading and spelling programmes, which are rapidly gaining recognition as the most cost-effective means of preventing reading failure. He is the author of (with Martin Turner) *Reading Fever: Why phonics must come first* (Centre for Policy Studies, 1996), *The End of Illiteracy? The Holy Grail of Clackmannanshire* (CPS, 1999) and *After the Literacy Hour: may be the best plan win* (CPS, 2004). He is a member of the NAS/UWT.

The aim of the Centre for Policy Studies is to develop and promote policies that provide freedom and encouragement for individuals to pursue the aspirations they have for themselves and their families, within the security and obligations of a stable and law-abiding nation. The views expressed in our publications are, however, the sole responsibility of the authors. Contributions are chosen for their value in informing public debate and should not be taken as representing a corporate view of the CPS or of its Directors. The CPS values its independence and does not carry on activities with the intention of affecting public support for any registered political party or for candidates at election, or to influence voters in a referendum.

© Centre for Policy Studies, November 2006

ISBN No: 1 905389 39 6

Centre for Policy Studies

57 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL

Tel: 020 7222 4488 Fax: 020 7222 4388

e-mail: mail@cps.org.uk website: www.cps.org.uk

Printed by The Centre for Policy Studies, 57 Tufton Street, SW1.

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THE ELIMINATION OF READING FAILURE	3
3. CONCLUSION	9

APPENDIX: WHAT IS SYNTHETIC PHONICS?

SUMMARY

- Following the publication of the Rose report, the DfES now accepts that synthetic phonics is the most appropriate way of teaching children to read. This is welcome.
- In attempting to encourage greater use of synthetic phonics in the classroom, it is dictating classroom procedure in detail. This is not welcome and is likely to be counter-productive.
- West Dunbartonshire is set to become the first local authority in the English-speaking world to eliminate reading failure. There, reading failure has already fallen to 6% (compared to 21% in England).
- West Dunbartonshire is not a prosperous or socially privileged area.
- West Dunbartonshire has achieved its success through adopting a “bottom-up” approach (in stark contrast to the “top-down” approach adopted by the DfES).
- The West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative has cost the equivalent of about £13 per pupil per year – about 0.5% of the education department budget. Achieving similar results for every primary school pupil in England would cost under £54 million.
- West Dunbartonshire shows that more central control is not the solution to the country's educational problems. Indeed, it is the problem. The power of a successful example – such as West Dunbartonshire – can do more than yet more well-intentioned but inevitably doomed top-down government edicts.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

West Dunbartonshire is set to become the first local authority in the English-speaking world to eradicate reading failure.¹ So far, this remarkable achievement has gone almost unnoticed outside of Scotland.

It appears to have gone unnoticed at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), which controls schools in England and Wales. On 8 September 2006, the DfES announced the new Framework for teaching reading.² Although this does incorporate the synthetic phonics approach used in West Dunbartonshire,³ it repeats a fundamental flaw of the old National Literacy Strategy: it dictates classroom procedure in minute detail.

Today, at least 21% of children in England cannot read to a satisfactory level.⁴ Yet in West Dunbartonshire, reading failure has fallen to 6% – a level

¹ “...this coming year [2007] will see almost all school leavers achieving the expected national reading levels, and commends all involved in wiping out illiteracy in West Dunbartonshire and giving our young people the very best start in life.” Jackie Baillie MSP, motion to the Scottish Parliament, 18 April 2006.

² See www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primaryframeworks for details of the new Framework for literacy.

³ See the Appendix for a brief description of what synthetic phonics is, and how it works.

⁴ The DfES reports that only 79% of pupils achieved Level 4 at Key Stage 2 tests in England in both 2005 and 2006. The true figure is probably far higher. See T Burkard, *After the Literacy Hour: May the Best Plan Win*, CPS, 2005.

far lower than the DfES would dare to announce as a target. And the simple lesson of the success of West Dunbartonshire is that it is not the result of some edict from central government (whether in Edinburgh or London). It is the result of local initiative and the work of local teachers.

Today, 21% of children in England are unable to read to a satisfactory level. In West Dunbartonshire, that figure is just 6% – and falling.

It is time for the lessons of West Dunbartonshire to be applied throughout the UK. The key question facing policymakers is no longer: “What to do?” (even the DfES accepts that the answer is: “use synthetic phonics”). But, “how to do it?”

This paper attempts to answer the latter question.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ELIMINATION OF READING FAILURE

Children who cannot read and who cannot write face nothing but humiliation and failure in school. For them, school often leads to unemployment, misery and for too many, crime.⁵

Small-scale interventions with synthetic phonics have proved that reading failure can be eliminated. But this has only happened in a relatively small number of schools, where talented and dedicated teachers have gone against the prevailing wisdom on how to teach children. What is remarkable about West Dunbartonshire is that synthetic phonics is being used across an entire education authority, in a programme involving almost 60,000 children.⁶ There, the rate of reading failure has already fallen to 6% and is expected to be eliminated altogether.⁷

West Dunbartonshire is not a prosperous or socially privileged neighbourhood. According to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (2006), 19% of people in West Dunbartonshire are classified as “income deprived” – the second highest level in Scotland. Life expectancy for women

⁵ A survey undertaken by the Shannon Trust, a charity devoted to literacy in prisons, found that around 38% of adult prisoners are described as having no useful literacy skills, while a further 29% have a reading age below that of an eight-year-old. *The Guardian*, 8 August 2006.

⁶ *Guardian Unlimited*, 6 March, 2006.

⁷ In some LEAs in England (such as Kingston upon Hull), the failure rate approaches 30%.

at birth is the second lowest in all of Scotland (for men, it is third lowest).⁸ The suicide rate is the third highest in the United Kingdom.⁹ Its success in tackling illiteracy is therefore all the more remarkable.

19% of people in West Dunbartonshire are classified as “income deprived” – the second highest level in Scotland. Life expectancy for women at birth is the second lowest in all of Scotland (for men, it is third lowest). The suicide rate is the third highest in the United Kingdom.

HOW HAVE THEY DONE IT?

The success of the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative can be attributed to three factors:

- Firstly, there is the *political context*: schools and local authorities in Scotland are largely free from the centralised managerialism that afflicts schools in England. Although the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative has received the full support of the Scottish Executive, most of the important decisions have been made at a local level.
- Secondly, there is the *administrative context*. Successful innovation has relied on co-operation, not coercion. Dr Tommy MacKay, the driving force behind the West Dunbartonshire programme, has gained the confidence of everyone in West Dunbartonshire – from council leaders and officials down to school dinner ladies. As an outside contractor, he has not had any power to tell people what to do and has achieved change by inspiration and the power of ideas.
- Lastly, there is the *educational context*. In England and Wales, it is assumed that 20% of children will have ‘special needs’ – usually meaning that they cannot read and write.¹⁰ Faced with a child who is slow to learn to read, teachers and psychologists tend to think in terms of what is wrong with the child – and not what is wrong with the teaching. This cycle of low expectations and reading failure can be broken.

It should also be noted that it is not a question of money. The West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative has cost about £13 per pupil per year – or about 0.5% of the education department budget.¹¹ If every LEA in

⁸ See D Clark et al, *Healthy life expectancy in Scotland*, HLE Measurement in Scotland Steering Group, March 2004.

⁹ ONS, *Suicide Trends and geographical variations in the UK 1991-2004*, 2006.

¹⁰ Quoted in T MacKay, *The West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative*, West Dunbartonshire Council, 2006.

¹¹ See T MacKay, op. cit.

England were able to achieve this cost-effectiveness for all the 4,150,000 children in primary schools in England in 2006, the total cost would be under £54 million.

The West Dunbartonshire Literacy initiative has cost just £13 per pupil per year – or about 0.5% of the education department budget.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

The hyperactivity and centralising nature of the DfES under New Labour is well-documented and has been frequently criticised by unions, teachers, school governors, politicians and commentators.

This kind of approach can be worse than useless. In a study of similar governmental hyperactivity in California and Texas, the author noted:¹²

...rather than contributing to substantial improvements, adopting improvement programmes may also add to the endless cycle of initiatives that seem to sap the strength and spirit of schools and their communities.

Top-down initiatives of the sort favoured by the DfES almost invariably have the effect of reducing local initiative. As a result, it can be stated with confidence that the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative – which has been a locally inspired and managed project – could not have evolved in England.

The West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative was first endorsed by the local authority in 1996. As Dr MacKay states:¹³

It was a time of significant change for local government in Scotland following the reorganisation brought about by the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994. It was also a time of significant opportunity. The 32 new Councils were, for the most part, smaller than the 12 regional authorities that had preceded them. They had extensive powers in governing their own affairs at the local level...

Local authorities in England do retain a measure of independence (at least in theory): DfES literacy policies are indeed only advisory, not compulsory. However, the freedom of action of LEAs is severely limited by central control of funding.

In fairness, there is an increasing number of schools and education authorities in England which are starting to realise that there is no excuse for reading failure. Given the incentive and the freedom to act, there is no

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

reason why they should not now be able to learn from the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative, and design even better programmes.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT

One of the most remarkable aspects of the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative is the extent to which it has changed the culture in schools and support services. Talking to teachers and officials, one is struck by their positive attitude and their conviction that they will be the first education authority in the Anglophone world to conquer illiteracy.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative is the extent to which it has improved the culture in schools and support services.

These sort of changes are not easy to effect. Dr MacKay explains that:¹⁴

The whole concept of shaping the educational environment to the benefit of disadvantaged populations requires recognition of a wider question: the nature of educational change... A failure to understand and plan effectively for the process of change in organisations is a primary cause of the widespread failure of school projects, and indeed of the general failure of educational reform... Fullan (1993, 1999) has demonstrated the ease with which 'restructuring' occurs time and again in educational organisations but the much greater difficulty of 'reculturing'. The former is done by fiat. **It is the outcome of the mandates of policy-makers** [emphasis added]. The latter refers to the process by which school staffs come to question their beliefs and habits.

Dr MacKay elucidates on the obstacles to change:¹⁵

It is an arena where researchers design studies, but where politicians, funders, managers and workers follow many other often conflicting agendas; where mundane issues such as council policies, financial crises, breakdowns in communication, staff turnover and vacant posts conspire to undermine the most carefully laid plans... It is a world in which high fidelity of implementation is often vitiated by staff illness, maternity leave or burnout, or by the competing demands of other initiatives.

Before the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative, Dr MacKay had run a more modest programme in a single school. In the first instance, he successfully introduced a highly-structured initiative to control pupil behaviour in the playground, which was described as a "battleground". The teachers, for whom

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 23-24

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 20-21

work had been a never-ending struggle to prevent muggings and worse, now found themselves in control of their classrooms. Dr MacKay comments:¹⁶

Staff interviews indicated that the school and its ethos had been totally transformed. The improvements in the project children had generalised through the school as a whole, and classroom behaviour was reported to have improved. Overall there was a strong perception that this study had not only achieved significant results but that it had also made meaningful changes to quality of life for the project children and for the school as a whole. A systematic follow up two years later demonstrated that enduring gains had been achieved.

Following this programme, Dr MacKay introduced a reading project which prefigured the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative. It was the success of these initial efforts which persuaded other local schools to participate.

The key word is "local".

The key word here is "local": what happens down the road is inevitably a stronger influence than something that happens to strangers at the other end of the country. As a result, more schools participated, and more teachers identified with the programme to the point where they used their own initiative to improve and develop the measures initiated by Dr MacKay.

Neither Dr MacKay nor anyone else has the ultimate answer to teaching children to read. No one ever will.¹⁷ Yet 20 years from now, people will wonder why teaching children to read was ever considered a problem.

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Sociologist Basil Bernstein's dictum that "education cannot compensate for society" is one of the most destructive and wrong-headed notions to gain currency in post-war Britain. It has provided an all-purpose excuse for reading failure, and has turned schools in deprived areas into battlegrounds where beleaguered teachers struggle to maintain the barest semblance of order.¹⁸

Coupled with this defeatism is the progressive notion that children learn 'naturally'. The cant phrase, "the learning belongs to the child" inhibits teachers from taking decisive action when children fail to respond to their normal classroom routines. Instead, children often experience years of

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ The author is an educational publisher who produces reading and spelling programmes that are now used in West Dunbartonshire. Its products are continuously revised (the Dancing Bears series of teaching literacy is already in its fifth edition, although it is only four years old). All of its teaching materials can be viewed at www.promethean.fsnet.co.uk

¹⁸ For a description of the failure of much inner city education, see Francis Gilbert's *I'm a Teacher, Get Me Out of Here!*, Short Books, 2004

humiliating failure before psychologists are called in – and even then, the name of the game is to look for putative causes within the child. Children will then receive Individual Education Plans which supposedly cater to their individual learning styles. Teachers are thus expected to individualise instruction for each child with ‘special needs’.

If every child is expected to read, and if every child is given the tools to enable them to read, every child will read. Fewer excuses and more dogma (in the true sense of the word) are needed.

This approach is clearly flawed. If every child is expected to read, and if every child is given the tools to enable them to read, every child will read. Fewer excuses and more dogma (in the true sense of the word) are needed.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION

“Localism” is fraught with danger for politicians, exchanging the certain surrender of control in return for the unknown potential of local initiative and enterprise. It will take unusual courage and self-restraint for an education minister to devolve authority to the LEAs, especially when one considers the record of 'loony-left' local authorities in the 1980s.

However, the days of far-left infiltration are long past, and centralisation has proved a failure. While there can be no question of returning to the *status quo ante*, the vast majority of pupils were far better taught before the DfES took the helm.

And the timely surrender of authority can be a political masterstroke. Gordon Brown’s credibility rests on his early surrender of control over interest rates to the Bank of England.

Similarly, all that needs be done to conquer illiteracy is to hold up the example of West Dunbartonshire, and to empower local councillors and administrators to learn from the lesson of West Dunbartonshire.

What will not work is another central edict, enforcing yet another reading method on the 17,500 primary schools in England and Wales. Even if the DfES were suddenly to decide to adopt the best programme of synthetic phonics, it would still be incapable of capturing the enthusiasm and co-operation of the country’s teachers. Little would be gained.

More central control is not the solution. Indeed, it is the problem. It is time for politicians and the DfES to trust that the power of a successful example – such as West Dunbartonshire – can do better than yet more well-intentioned but inevitably doomed top-down government edicts.

APPENDIX

WHAT IS SYNTHETIC PHONICS?

At heart, synthetic phonics is a simple idea. Teaching reading can be easy.

The core idea of synthetic phonics can be summed up in “c-a-t=cat”. Children learn what sounds are represented by letters, and they learn to blend them into words. This simple principle is supported by the following structures.

CHILDREN ARE NOT CONFUSED BY BEING TAUGHT DIFFERENT STRATEGIES

Blending sounds into words is the *only* approach taught. This is logical, because it most accurately mimics the way skilled reading works. Children are not taught to recognise words as wholes. They are not encouraged to use pictures and context to ‘guess’ at words they can’t read. These latter two practices are widespread in English-speaking countries. The evidence now shows that they are a major cause of reading failure.¹⁹

DIGRAPHS: AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT OF SYNTHETIC PHONICS

Synthetic phonics also entails the teaching of digraphs (two-letter combinations that make one sound, such as “sh”, “ee” and “ar”) at the beginning. Since about 40% of all words in normal text contain digraphs, these must be taught or the synthetic phonics approach will not work.

¹⁹ See B A Shaywitz et al, “Development of Left Occipitotemporal Systems for Skilled Reading in Children After Phonologically-Based Intervention”, *Biological Psychiatry* 2004;55.

CHILDREN CAN LEARN LETTERS AND BLENDING FAR FASTER THAN MOST PEOPLE THINK

Most children are capable of learning a new sound each day. About 80% of the pupils in a synthetic phonics classroom will be reading simple sentences in a matter of a few weeks. They will be able to read stories at the end of their first term of instruction.

ONCE CHILDREN HAVE LEARNED TO DECODE REGULAR SPELLINGS, LEARNING THE IRREGULAR WORDS POSES LITTLE PROBLEM

With most 'irregular' words, it is only the vowels that cause a problem. A child who can decode regular words takes this in his or her stride. The old National Literacy Strategy did not work because it specified teaching common irregular words first, using whole-word teaching.

STRUGGLING READERS GET EXTRA HELP BEFORE THEY FALL BEHIND

Since the learning objectives are simple and well-defined, the 20% who do not catch on can be identified in the first few weeks of school – rather than three years later, as is generally the case now. It is now widely recognised that the sooner poor readers get additional help, the better.²⁰ With synthetic phonics there is no need for time-consuming and expensive assessments: it is merely a question as to how much work it takes for a pupil to master a learning objective.

HELPING OLDER CHILDREN: THE TOE-BY-TOE PROGRAMME

When a school or local authority adopts a synthetic phonics programme, there are inevitably large numbers of pupils in higher grades who cannot read. Normal synthetic phonics programmes do not work: they contain a lot of babyish material, and are not focused for remedial work.

The leading remedial reading programme in Britain is Toe-by-Toe, a simple and well-structured programme which almost any literate person can use to good effect to teach poor readers. It all but eliminates the need for specialist training.

West Dunbartonshire schools have deployed Toe-by-Toe on a systematic basis, and it has been a great success. They are also starting to use Sound Foundations reading and spelling programmes, which – like Toe-by-Toe – are low-cost materials that can be used without any need for specialist training. But unlike Toe-by-Toe, they are suitable for very young children. With Sound Foundations, no child ever need experience the humiliation of falling behind.

²⁰ See the National Reading Panel, *Summary Report*, NICHD, 2000.