MARKET RESEARCH SUMMARY

Please note that this document has not been scripted for marking, and therefore does not comply with the Harvard Referencing System. It just acts an aid so I can make sense of all my notes when creating my Major Project for Bournemouth University. All websites that I have used are listed at the end of this document.

What is the problem?

One in five children leaves primary school not knowing how to read properly.

Why?

The vast amount of government funding into the children's literacy problem over the past ten years, has worked for the top level of achievers leaving school with the expected level of reading. However, it still leaves the 118,000 pupils who slip through the net each year unable to read properly.

What affect does it have?

As the primary school pupils who cannot read venture off into secondary school education, it becomes an increasing struggle for them to access the curriculum. These pupils need to have a reading age of at least nine, as they will not be able to keep up with the core subjects that are taught everyday in school. It makes you wonder, for example, what they are doing and thinking about when they are asked to read from a text book and follow out the instructions.

I know in my school we had different class levels and it's only now that I am forced into thinking about such matters, that I realise the kids in the lower groups were the 'naughty kids'. Their attention span was low, they often played truant and when they were in class their behaviour generally got them sent out. In light of this new research I can only help but think that poor literacy could be one of the main causes for this.

So what happens when they leave? If they leave school at 16 with no ability to read and no qualifications, then that can only mean poor chances of getting a job; never mind getting a job they actually enjoy. A special report by Lucy Manning explains that, "two thirds of those who do come here [Ashfield Young Offenders Institution] have one thing in common: they can't read and write properly." Of course it doesn't mean that those who leave school unable to read properly, with no qualifications or job end up turning to crime, but the evidence shows that it is a likely possibility.

The Rose Report

The Rose Report, was competed last year by Sir Jim Rose who is the Government Literacy Advisor. The report gave an insight into teaching reading and reviewed the methods that were used to teach. It showed that using synthetic phonics had a distinctive level of success over the other methods. As a result of this report, the government rushed out advice as to teach synthetic phonics to all primary schools. However, some school are still resilient to whole heartedly take on teaching synthetic phonics.

The following recommendations from the Rose Report is taken from Channel 4's Lost for Words season (http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/L/lost_for_words/issues_6.html)

- There would be clear guidance in nursery and primary schools that teaching literacy should involve developing children's speaking and listening skills.
- High-quality, systematic phonic work, as defined by the Rose Review would be taught in all schools and that children should be taught to decode (read) and encode (write)

- Phonics work should be at the centre of a broad and rich language curriculum that takes full account of developing the four strands of language: They are speaking, listening, reading and writing. Another aim of is to increase children's stock of words.
- The Primary National Strategy, which outlines what should be taught in primary schools, should continue to prove how good quality first teaching is by constant assessment of children's learning, paying particular attention to how they progress in phonics.
- They are also to assess how literacy is developed across the curriculum from the Foundation Stage onwards.

How must be done?

- For most children, high-quality, systematic phonic work should start by the age of five.
- This should be preceded by pre-reading activities that pave the way for such work to start.
- Phonic work for young children should be multi-sensory so it captures their interest, keeps them interested and helps them learn in imaginative and exciting ways.
- The searchlights model of teaching should be rearranged to take full account of word recognition and language comprehension as distinct processes related one to the other.
- 'Quality first teaching' with synthetic phonics should minimise the risk of children falling behind as well as making the whole process cost effective.
- If intervention is necessary for children with significant literacy difficulties, then it must be compatible with the mainstream practice with synthetic phonics at its core.
- Improvements made through intervention must be sustained and built upon when children return to their mainstream class.

What actually goes on in the classroom?

Since the Rose Report was published, nearly all schools use the Primary National Strategy's Primary Framework for Teaching Literacy, which puts high quality phonic work at the heart of the classroom. In 1997/ 1998, Labour put in force a literacy hour every day. This dramatically improved children reaching required level for their age by rising from 79% in 1995 to 84% in 2006. But as you can see, this still leaves around 1 in 5 children not knowing how to read properly.

What is synthetic phonics anyway?

Synthetic phonics are sounds that make up words. The synthetic part comes from synthesise, meaning put together and the phonic part means sound; so when we say synthetic phonics, we are really saying putting sounds together to read. There are a few variations in the SP (synthetic phonics) alphabetic code, some methods teach 42 graphemes (letter or letters that make up a phoneme (sound)), and some teach 44 graphemes. Each phoneme is taught in a set of similarly grouped phonemes until all are learnt. There are also variations on the order in which the phonemes are taught.

SP are considered a more useful way of teaching reading than teaching the names of the letters in the alphabet. For example, in the alphabet when we see the letter 'a' we automatically add "y" to it so it becomes "ay". Likewise in the rest of the alphabet we say "bee", "cee", "dee", "ee", "eff" etc. In synthetic phonics, "a" is pronounced as if it were in a word i.e. "a in ant" or "m" is pronounced "mmmm in mountain" not "muh" or "emm".

How does synthetic phonics teach children how to read?

Firstly the children learn all the sounds of the letters and digraphs (two/three/four letters that make up a phoneme). Then when they have learnt this, they learn to blend the sounds together into words, thus being able to read. The children then learn alternatives for some sounds i.e. "ee" in "tree", "ea" in "dream" and "ei" in seize which all sound the same, yet are spelt differently. This helps the child to decode (breakdown) words into their phonemes and have a go at spelling, when they have learnt the alternative sounds.

What are the benefits of teaching synthetic phonics over other methods of reading?

Throughout the whole process of learning synthetic phonics, the child is learning to decode the word into sounds that they understand so that they know what the word says. With other forms of teaching kids to read, for example "look and say", it is encouraging the child to guess the word by looking at the word as a whole, and recognising patterns. The child often gets clues on a page with illustrations of the word, which emphasises guessing.

SP teaches the child to read independently, simply by decoding and encoding the words. It is this basic principle that encourages children to attempt to read words that they have not seen before, simply by trying to break it into sounds that they can read. This is proven to be more successful than the "look and say" method of reading because if an unknown word is presented to a child with no clues on the page as to what the word might be, they don't know how to try and go about reading the word.

How can you truly say one method is better than the other?

Though SP has been proven to be a very successful way of reading, you cannot say that it completely eradicates illiteracy. In the classroom SP are taught briskly, consistently, and systematically. It is putting these three actions into practise that makes SP as successful as it is. However, children can become bored of the repetition, no matter how briskly the teacher moves on the next phoneme. Critics like Michael Rosen suggests that "synthetic phonics aren't enough [and that SP] on its own won't get your child to be excited about books". I realise that this can be true after watching Channel 4's Lost for Words season and I'm sure this will be backed up when I visit my local primary school next week and sit in on a reception class, where the children are repeating sound after sound after sound. This doesn't get the child excited about books, but I think that what makes the child excited, is their ability to read and soon be able to pick up any book they want.

I agree that there is a need of a variety of methods to teach children to how read, and cannot justify the fact that a variety of methods will confuse a child when every child is different. I do understand that you cannot individually tailor a method to each child in a class, but this is something that can be helped at home. The relationship between a parent, a teacher and the child is so important and the communication between the three is just as key. Whatever the child learns in school should be communicated back home and more focus paid onto the child with whatever method that the child learns best in order to help develop the child's reading.

I believe that due to the SP method being so successful, then it is a good way to start a child to learn how to read. If this proves to be a successful method, then there is no reason why they shouldn't keep it up until they can read fluently. However, if a child is noticeably unengaged with reading then I think that the parent should actively try methods to see what captivates the child back into reading.

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