7 Conclusion Why Schoolchildren Can't Read: Problem and Solution

The Problem: The Research/Practice Gap

In England, the chances are that more than one child in three will not have learned how to read after spending two years in primary school. At least half the student population in older grades are still struggling to read. For those acquainted with the nature of current teaching practice, this state of affairs will come as no surprise at all. Although research demonstrates unequivocally that certain skills need to be taught to beginning pupils, typically this is not happening in Key Stage 1 classrooms in this country. The failure to provide children with the structured, sequential, explicit phonological and code-oriented instruction that they need is depriving them of the best opportunity to learn to read, write, and spell at an early age, as well as reducing their capabilities at every stage in the future.

Over the past thirty years, reading itself has been redefined. Learning to read is currently seen as little more than a memorisation and guessing exercise. Many children cannot make the transition from this behaviour to proper reading. It is not the teachers, who as a group have come under heavy criticism over declining standards, who are to blame. They are merely doing what they have been taught to do. No – one must look higher up the chain of command. Responsibility for poor reading standards lies with the many primary school heads, local education authority officials, school inspectors, teacher trainers, and national teacher organisations and unions who advocate methods of reading instruction radically at variance with the findings from empirical research. It is they who most influence practice, dictating methods of instruction that do not work. In effect, it is as if they are happy to send their educational troops into battle each day armed with blanks.

England is not the only country where a discrepancy between research and practice has developed. There is the same dis-ease between teaching practice and reading research evident in such countries as the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In Europe also, in countries where traditional, more research-compatible methods have been the norm (Switzerland, for example) the continuation of these practices is coming under threat.

In this country, there has to be change and it will need to come quickly to avoid failing further generations of children.

The Solution

While it might be relatively clear how to solve the problem, it is less easy to see how the problem might be solved quickly. The more accurately teaching practice encapsulates the findings from reading research, the higher the reading attainment produced. Altering teaching practice so that it becomes as closely aligned as possible with the findings from research is the way to solve the problem, but how might the changes required be expedited?

First, that which is dogma needs to be recognised and discarded. Within today's educational establishment, entrenched beliefs, certain assumptions that are based on false premises, are stubbornly adhered to. These need to be challenged. As a first principle, before any new practice is implemented, its effectiveness should be scientifically demonstrated. The first question one must ask before implementing practice is: where is the evidence that this practice works? Practices which are not based on solid evidence that they are effective need to be eradicated.

The public would be outraged if a drug with damaging side-effects were released onto the market and used widely to treat patients without its having been rigorously tested and proven safe; in the field of medicine, a reliance on belief rather than evidence is not permitted. Yet, instruction in English classrooms operates on this basis regularly. New ideas or old ideas dressed up in new terminology are held up as the latest theories to be put into practice, when in fact, they are simply examples of ideology being incorporated into practice. In this case, it is our schoolchildren who are the principal casualties of this carelessness; it is they who are the victims of the

instructional shortcomings and who must suffer the many far-reaching and detrimental side-effects of not being able to read.

Second, it is essential that those with the power to influence practice recognise that there is indeed a problem. Assessment procedures and the results produced must be questioned. How many times have we heard a senior politician or educationalist assert that standards are actually improving, that reports of widespread reading failure are alarmist, or exaggerated, or even, politically motivated, that, in short, there is no problem? Usually quoted are the rising numbers of A level and GCSE passes, the improving National Curriculum test results. But, is this evidence to be trusted? Many parents in the country worry that reading standards have fallen, and that illiteracy amongst the young is on the increase. The constant shifting of goalposts to create a positive impression does not fool the parents of children who cannot read – nor does the replacing of letter grades with anecdotal, non-graded, no-fail report cards.

The same question that must be asked about teaching practice must be asked of the present system for monitoring reading standards: does it work? The national curriculum tests in reading describe (through a teacher's particular interpretation of events via a running record) how a child behaves when faced with a reading passage he or she is likely to have seen before. This system of assessment is entirely consistent with the child-centred philosophy that no child can be seen to fail; a child's self-esteem must be preserved at all cost, and if one looks very hard and sufficiently lowers the benchmarks, there will always be some behaviour that one can find to praise. What must be asked, however, is: what evidence is there to support this way of thinking? In the first place, if a child fails to read, what evidence is there that it is the child's fault and not the fault of the instructional setting? Whose self-esteem is really at stake – the child's, or the teacher's? In the second place, what evidence is there that the present system for assessing reading ability is the most accurate means of doing so? The present nature of testing reading, which ensures that accurate comparisons between children, between schools, or over time cannot be made, looks suspiciously designed to obscure evidence rather than make it available as a tool for creating change.

Third, when challenging those who are in a position to dictate or influence practice to choose only instructional and

assessment methods that work, that have evidence to support them, the nature of 'evidence' needs to be examined. From a scientific perspective, the only source of information that has implications for effective practice is comparative intervention research where one procedure is compared to another under repeated, controlled experimental conditions. Descriptive studies explore and describe existing problems but they do not provide the sort of data from which effective solutions can be inferred.

The whole-word method of instruction and its variants are derived from the descriptive studies of child development and learning. But these have not been subjected to empirical investigation and therefore represent nothing more than untested hypotheses. They are 1960s ideology which has become fixed as 1990s dogma. There was no reason to suppose that these methods would ever have worked but they suited the ideology of the times. Their introduction was an experiment, a kind of educational vivisection carried out on the school population.

Instead of experimenting on children by implementing these untested ideas, the results from controlled experiments and their implications for instruction need to be recognised as the more reliable evidence available, the evidence upon which teaching practice should be based. The neglect of empirical data, and resistance to objectivity, seen in both present intructional practice and assessment procedures does not make sense if one is truly interested in ensuring that all children learn how to read.

Fourth, there is a need to recognise, too, the impossibility of implementing current theories. Whole-word, child-centred, individualised methods, adopted in the sixties, were perhaps an understandable reaction to such traditional and élitist practices as the eleven-plus examinations, to a long tradition of authoritarianism and control. However well-meaning the intent of whole-language methods, which have been widely promoted as the route to greater teacher 'empowerment', the cruel truth is that such methods are next to impossible for any teacher, no matter how talented, to implement in practice. However well-meaning the progressive ideas of shared reading, 'real books', 'emergent literacy', 'invented spelling', 'teacher-as-facilitator', it is impossible for one teacher to 'facilitate' and supervise these practices to any real degree in

a class of twenty-five to thirty children; the amount of 'facilitation' a teacher will be able to provide in such circumstances will be marginal at best. Perhaps these ideas, if tested empirically, would prove effective compared to other methods if each teacher were given only one child to teach? This, however, is not, nor has it ever been, the reality that teachers must deal with. At best, any teacher faced with a classroom of twenty to thirty non-reading five-year-olds will feel severely challenged in attempting to adopt individualised, whole-word methods in such circumstances. Rather than feeling 'empowered', it is far more likely that he or she will feel defeated.

Thus, however attractive progressive ideas might be, there needs to be greater honesty in questioning the practicality of implementing such ideas within a normal classroom setting. And the same questions need to be asked of current individualised methods of assessment: how practical are these for the purpose and might not a teacher spend his or her time in more productive ways? In teaching or testing reading, a pragmatic rather than an ideological view must be taken.

Finally, those in positions of power must question whether it is largely fear that determines present teaching practice and if so, attempt to overcome it. Those who have advocated practices that do not work must not be afraid to admit that perhaps they were wrong. Others have had the courage to do so. Since whole language methods were introduced to the state of California in 1982, reading standards, once among the best in the country, began to decline and eventually, in 1995, plummeted to the very worst in the country. Yet, Bill Honig, who had encouraged and presided over these methods from 1982 to 1992 as California's superintendent of schools, was brave enough to admit his mistake. Speaking before the state assembly's education committee in 1995, he explained that he had changed his mind since researchers in the past 10 years had discovered the importance of phonological processes in reading. Phonics methods are now being reintroduced to the state of California.

In England, there may be the fear that phonological and code-emphasis methods of instruction represent a return to all that is old-fashioned, to didacticism, competition, élitism, and selection. This need not be the case. Instead, the simple policy one must adhere to is that no practice should be embraced

without evidence to support its effectiveness. Rather than increase differences among children, differences will diminish if all children receive the sort of instruction that teaches them to read.