



What happened to England's National Literacy Strategy?

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Henrietta Dombey assesses the evidence.

John Stannard and Laura Huxford's **The Literacy Game: The story of the National Literacy Strategy** is a tale of government ministers, hungry journalists, partisan researchers and opportunistic publishers, not to speak of schools and pupils. **Henrietta Dombey** assesses a turbulent history and the lessons that can be drawn from it.

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In **The Literacy Game** John Stannard and Laura Huxford, respectively the first director and the training director of England's National Literacy Strategy, give an informed and informative history of the largest and most ambitious project of literacy education in the developed world to date, as they document its conception, birth, early growth and recent forced change of direction.

But this is not a dispassionate account. Their tone is wounded: we were innocents in a deep political game, they argue. At first the Strategy developed well. SAT scores were rising. Ofsted reports were improving. But after a few years, other initiatives took educators' eyes off the literacy ball, the evaluation apparatus was wound down as the Numeracy and Literacy Strategies were merged to form a Primary National Strategy. Meanwhile, an unholy alliance of partisan researchers, right wing politicians and profit-hungry publishers of phonic schemes grew in strength and fed misinformation about the Strategy to journalists hungry for bad news. Government ministers, including Ruth Kelly the Secretary of State for Education, didn't try to understand the issues, and rather than defending the strategy's searchlights' approach to early reading, decided to throw it to the wolves, choosing other topics to champion instead.

So the Rose Inquiry was set up, with a narrow remit, and a less than impartial set of advisors, to focus on the teaching of early phonics rather than on the points recognised as weak by the book's authors: comprehension at Key Stage 2, the teaching of writing and the stubbornly wide gap in achievement between girls and boys. By 2005, literacy teaching had had its turn of governmental support: now it was time to dance to the tune of the **Daily Mail**.

Should we take all this at face value? Certainly their priorities for attention seem well chosen. And the searchlights metaphor (they avoid the term 'model') at the heart of the Strategy provides a richer and more complex view of early reading than does the 'simple view of reading' (Rose, 2006) which is now supposed to supplant it. The simple view equates the early stages of learning to read with decoding, lifting the words from the page, which its proponents argue should be dominated by phonics, the relationships between speech sounds and letters. It also separates the process of decoding from comprehension, postponing any attention to comprehension of written text until children can 'read' fluently. And it separates the teaching of reading from the teaching of writing.

The searchlights approach

By contrast, the searchlights approach involves more than this. Although it gives close attention to phonics (set out in clear term-by-term detail in the documents to guide teachers) it also teaches children other tactics to make sense of texts – whole word recognition and graphic knowledge, grammatical knowledge and knowledge of context. In this approach, phonics is seen as necessary but not sufficient for successful mastery of the early stages of learning to read.

The searchlights metaphor is based on John Stannard's childhood experience of lying in bed at night during the Battle of Britain, watching three or four searchlights catch an incoming bomber in their intersecting beams. But its credibility depends on more than just one individual's personal experience. This view of reading and learning to read is supported by a long tradition of research, mainly in the US, starting with Cattell in 1886, who found that we recognise meaningful words more rapidly than random arrays of letters, and meaningful sentences more rapidly than random arrays of words. Something more than processing the visual input letter by letter and word by word is involved.

Ninety years later, drawing a parallel with the latest generation of computers, David Rumelhart called reading 'simultaneous, multi-level, interactive processing' (Rumelhart, 1976). Numerous studies have shown that to make sense of print, like expert readers, beginners use a range of kinds of information (Goodman, 1968; Adams, 1990). They do not go about reading in the linear way proposed by the simple view, that is by first identifying letters, then using their phonic knowledge to build these into words, then putting the words together in sentences, bringing the process of comprehension to bear only at the very end of this assembly process.

This wider approach is acutely important in English, where 'sounding and blending' words letter by letter is much less likely to yield the word represented than it is in languages with simpler spelling patterns such as Spanish and Finnish. Common words such as 'one' and 'two' are particularly resistant to a phonics only approach.

Improvement in standards of literacy?

So far, so good. But what about Stannard and Huxford's claims that the Strategy has brought about a significant improvement in standards of literacy? Certainly SAT scores in reading improved after the implementation of the Strategy in 1998. (Improvement in writing, as they admit, has been much slower.) However the rise in English scores for 11-year-olds started earlier – in 1995, before the implementation of the Strategy, then stalled between 2000 and 2004, and since then has only stuttered forward slightly, failing to meet even the revised government targets.

It has also been argued, most notably by Prof. Peter Tymms of Durham University, that these figures paint a less than accurate picture of advances in children's reading proficiency. With increasing pressure on teachers to deliver ever better SAT scores for their 7- and 11-year-olds, the rise in scores to 2000 just shows that teachers got better at training children to take tests (Tymms, 2004). The Statistics Commission has endorsed this view, stating that 'the improvement in English KS2 test scores between 1995 and 2000 substantially overstates the improvement in standards of English primary schools over that period.' (Statistics Commission, 2005, p.3).

The authors' proud boast that the Strategy hauled England up the international league table of 10-year-olds' literacy scores also needs further inspection. As they claim, in 2001 England came third in the scores for 10-year-olds' reading comprehension in the PIRLS international study. (If Finland had participated we would have been fourth.) But the tests were taken by children with only two years' experience of the Strategy, so the scores tell us as much about the effectiveness of their pre-Strategy teaching as they do about the Strategy's effectiveness. And the children in most of the competing countries were unused to tests of the type involved, which were, in fact, very similar to the SATs tests.

Even more importantly, the PIRLS study also assessed children's attitudes to literacy. In this England's 10-year-olds came near the bottom, showing much less liking for reading than their counterparts in both high test scoring countries such as Sweden and low test scorers as the Czech Republic (Twist et al., 2001). No mention is made of this in the book under review. But it prompted a researcher at England's National Foundation for Educational Research to re-run a study of attitudes to reading carried out five years earlier, producing the finding that attitudes of 9- and 11-year-olds had changed markedly for the worse between 1998 and 2003 (Sainsbury, 2004).

So, after the implementation of the Strategy, our children may be slightly but not dramatically more competent than

their equivalents had been before, but they like reading a lot less than children of their age used to. Perhaps they have become bored by a strictly regulated diet of texts, (or worse still, extracts) chosen to fit with the specified and highly detailed objectives set out in the original Framework (DfEE 1998). Perhaps they have tired of the predictable structure of the Literacy Hour. Perhaps the heavy emphasis on technique rather than purpose or audience is proving counter-productive to their development as readers and writers. Certainly projects valuing their experience, concerns and communicative intentions appear to be more successful in developing children's power as writers and narrowing the gender achievement gap than exercises in the use of subordinating conjunctions. Successful projects have involved children in exploring the mental worlds of powerful literary texts through drama (e.g. Nicholson, 2006), writing personal journals where they are free to choose their topics and their readers (e.g. Graham, 2003) or engaging with different digital technologies (e.g. Bearne et al., 2004).

As well as involving the children in significant communicative acts, these projects all treated the teachers as informed professionals, capable of exploring underlying ideas, in a critical interplay between concrete classroom experience and theories about literacy, teaching and children's learning. Dialogue was a key feature of professional development sessions. All this is rather different from the 'roll-out' of the Strategy.

This should not surprise us. If we look at the countries such as Canada and Finland, that do consistently well in international studies of both reading proficiency and attitudes to literacy, we see that their teachers are highly educated (a Master's degree is the norm in Finland) and enjoy a high degree of autonomy (Mullis et al., 2003). Parental involvement features strongly. Government imposed tests are rare and there is little pressure on teachers to lever up children's scores on them.

The teachers in the successful writing projects referred to earlier were all operating within the confines of the Strategy. Although not part of the regular Strategy process, the last project referred to was actually supported by the directors of the Strategy. Collectively they show that with trust, encouragement and the opportunity to develop a strong understanding of powerful literacy learning, teachers can dramatically improve their power to teach children to become more committed as well as much more competent readers and writers. Despite its pressure on teachers to focus on the technical aspects of literacy teaching, the Strategy has not reduced all literacy teaching in England to the delivery of tricks out of a governmental box.

So where are we now? The final chapter of this book sadly documents the official switch-off of the searchlights metaphor. The hope is feebly expressed that all will not be lost, that as the simple view of reading is imposed, teachers will continue to teach children other means of making sense of texts. We must certainly endorse that hope and take action to turn it into classroom reality. But we must do more than that. All those of us involved in the literacy education of young children must be determined to hold to the view that literacy learning is not simple, but a richly complex matter that is essentially concerned with making meaning, and that teachers should be encouraged to develop their understanding of how it operates and their experience of texts with the power to expand children's control over language and the world. If we are to help our children to become both more proficient and also more committed readers and writers, we must treat both children and teachers as capable of thought, choice and personal investment.

[image:Henrietta Dombey.JPG:left]

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