

# REPORT BACK FROM THE TEN DISCUSSION GROUPS ON THE AFTERNOON OF THE 4<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2006

## DISCUSSION GROUP ONE The Phonics Debate: Playing with Sounds

This group – a wide range of professionals – backed up the views from ‘two different but wonderful speakers’ that practitioners need to be political, including contacting the Unions. (NUT has model letters to send to MPs and we should be lobbying alongside them.)

The group discussed the following key points:

- It is clear that synthetic phonics teaching has been shown in the past to fail, because English does not lend itself to being a phonetic language. So why do we now have the imposition of phonics?
- It is clear that playing with sounds is an important feature of learning but there is an impossibility in using phonics to learn to read English – multiple literacies nowadays;
- It is important to acknowledge the academic and professional debate and for it to be on-going;
- It is important for teachers to influence a whole range of other professionals and it's worth investing in those alliances. Partnership with parents must be meaningful and consistent;
- Co-training and co-learning are very important to support a unified voice and approach;
- It is essential to feel confidence as a practitioner – conferences such as this with other professionals, are vital. DfES roll-out of training is felt to be de-skilling;

The group raised the following issues:

- The need to build on children's strengths and teach to their differences;
- How to counteract the pressure on e.y. teachers to implement government demands;
- How should resistance be organised?
- The need to build up teachers own confidence in their professionalism and encourage them to articulate their experiences;
- That phonics is only a small part of failure to learn to read – poverty plays a vital role, as does a very narrow curriculum, which narrows expectations and reduced opportunities;
- How publishers can become very wealthy from having particular schemes (e.g. Jolly Phonics) promoted by government

*Leader: Marian Whitehead  
Scribe: Tricia Sharp*

## DISCUSSION GROUP TWO The National Literacy Strategy: Issues and Implications

The group discussed the following key points:

- Phonics as part of a broad approach, contextualised and appropriately delivered according to the needs of the child can be welcomed and is generally used by many teachers. A discrete, one-size-fits-all approach to phonics cannot.
- The way in which this is being simplified, disseminated as ‘tablets of stone’ and taken up as a national agenda for the implementation of discrete synthetic phonics is unacceptable.
- The likely impact of such approaches on children's experiences and the implications for training of early years professionals should be urgently addressed.

The group raised the following issues:

- Do we accept something as being the best of a bad situation or do we take a stand and say 'enough'?
- Whilst phonics as part of a broad programme can be welcomed, it is the 'discrete' aspects and the requirement for all children to do it that is wrong. The worry is that the overall national agenda or message taken from this is that 'synthetic phonics' is the best and only way.
- Teachers, rightly or wrongly, are receiving the message that the report requires teaching of phonics from day 1 in reception class. A 'tablets of stone' approach is being fed down to settings and teachers, often disseminated by people without early years training.
- As Henrietta Dombey pointed out, teachers have always taught phonics in many different appropriate, targeted and contextualised ways. Therefore the phonics debate seems out of touch with real practice.
- There are important issues for training. NQTs seem to be used to following government ring-binders and may be less reflective practitioners. Also, there seem to be some misunderstandings about what phonics mean amongst parents and EY practitioners; it is about rhyme (and rime) and listening and sound. For example, Phase 1 is all about phonological awareness rather than phoneme/ grapheme correspondence. This, though, appears to have been somewhat 'highjacked' by the proponents of certain resources.
- There is the issue of short term gains at long term cost. For example, phonics teaching can show quick improvements in sound decoding, but not in assisting children to develop higher order comprehension skills.
- What actions can be taken? Lobbying MPs; make sure Strategy documents are available widely; ensure early years representation on all curriculum area meetings. We should be the '*political voice of the child*', acting as reflective practitioners acting on carefully considered evidence.

**Leader: Jo Elks**  
**Scribe: Jane Payler**

### **DISCUSSION GROUP THREE**

#### **The multi-modal meaning-maker: play and drawing as literacy**

The group discussed the following key points:

- Relationship between the rapidly changing social world and new literacy skills required;
- Multi-modality: ICT/technological skills are required, not just reading of text (example shown of a poster from a public library that combined images, text in different fonts, etc);
- Language is meanings socially constructed through the use of abstract symbols, but so is a toddler using a brick as a mobile 'phone. Examples seen in role play in young children;
- Children's own meanings have a central role;
- Play is the ideal context in which young children make personal meanings;
- Symbols enter a culture, and in a global society are recognised by many cultures e.g. a heart for love, a cross as a mistake, wrong or forbidden;
- Supporting literacy development so that children read by choice, finding pleasure in literacy in all aspects of the curriculum and life;
- Being true to ourselves as professionals working with young children and their families;
- Using multi-modal representations:
- Using multi-modal representations:
  - emphasises what the child **can** do, rather than what they cannot;
  - promotes self-confidence and self-esteem of children and parents;
  - supports children's literacy, particularly those acquiring English as an additional language;
  - supports all symbolic languages including writing and children's mathematical graphics;
  - allows children to develop communication skills and to relate meanings to cultural experiences in the world outside the setting/school.

The group raised the following issues:

- Mark making extends into a narrative ...
  - if children are supported appropriately by an adult who values the child's views and developing literacy skills;
  - the children and adults are given time to reflect on the process as well as the product of their mark making;
- Gender:
  - boys can take ownership and pride in the mark making away from more formal writing/maths activities;
  - modification of the 'writing area' and use of multi-modal representations in other areas such as construction can support boys literacy;
- Adult role:
  - as listener, observer, facilitator;
  - as an annotator;
  - to plan experiences based on observations of what children **can** do;
- The use of model-making, cut-outs, drawings and marks supports development of symbols and allows divergent, creative thinking rather than 'right' or 'wrong' and this applies across the curriculum e.g. maths, K.& U. of the World;
- Parents need:
  - informing about the value of meaning-making through play and other multi-modal contexts;
  - communication about representations including drawing, mark making as well as writing and children's mathematical graphics;
  - engaging in the process to encourage children to mark make outside of the setting/school;

**Leader: Maulfry Worthington**  
**Scribe: Susan Waltham**

## **DISCUSSION GROUP FOUR**

### **Speaking and Listening: Back to Basics**

This group discussed the very different levels of speaking and listening skills that children possess on entry to school or nursery and the varying skills of parents as role models. They expressed concerns at the lack of interaction often evident between adults and children, within families and settings.

The group discussed the following key points:

- It is vital to raise the basic skills of practitioners to deliver the literacy curriculum;
- The importance of supporting families to support their children's language development;
- The need to improve practitioners (and senior managers) knowledge of child development;
- It is necessary to ensure that there is overall respect (from government, parents, etc.) for the early years and what it achieves with children.

The group raised the following issues:

- Family environments and the lack of communication in some families;
- How some practitioners do not give children time to respond;
- Problems experienced by some families in accessing Sure Start and other initiatives;
- Children's need for broad experiences – concepts follow a rich experiential opportunities;
- Concern that the starting point for some children in relation to language is low and yet Year 1 have high expectations from the Foundation Stage;
- Play needs to be incorporated in the curriculum to the end of KS1 (at least!);

- The apparent lack of respect for practitioners' knowledge and skills from senior managers who are more concerned about targets and league tables;
- That there is too much pressure on children, too much rushing them and not given them enough time to absorb learning;
- The poor pay and high turnover of private and voluntary sector staff;
- The fact that the NVQ qualification does not include child development, Foundation Stage curriculum or how to plan for learning and teaching.

**Leader: Helen Shelbourne**

**Scribe: Julie Green**

## **DISCUSSION GROUP FIVE**

### **The bilingual setting: the richness of language development**

The group discussed the following key points:

- Context is so important. Language needs to be contextualised and children need to see/understand its purpose;
- Language has a number of different parts which form the whole including cultural elements, social elements and psycho-linguistic elements in addition to phonetic awareness;
- Some cultures do not place the same emphasis on children's spoken language. There may be a lack of status held by some families for spoken language, yet this so important for children to build upon for literacy skills. Children who are competent in ANY spoken language on school entry fare better;
- Adults working with children who do not have English as a first language need appropriate expertise and understanding. They may require a lot more support to help them meet the all-round needs of these children. External pressures on teachers make them anxious when children do not make the progress expected;
- The way in which multi-cultural understanding is delivered is fragmented, and children – and their teachers, often do not have a holistic, comprehensible picture of e.g. Hinduism.

The group raised the following issues:

- Many children do not have a secure knowledge of their own language (NB: Asian Bengali), neither do they speak English. Some children live in a twilight world of semi-lingualism because they do not become proficient in one language;
- Children not feeling confident to use their heritage/first language in school. Adults/teachers need confidence to support children and also in building the confidence of young children;
- It may difficult to assess the conceptual development of children for whom English is their second language (because they may express themselves better in their own language);
- When children enter school without English, as they become more fluent, they may lose their own cultural identity;
- Bi-lingualism poses a number of issues, not just about reading, but about the symbol system of language in terms of writing using different symbols and directionality;
- The appropriateness of literacy hours for some bilingual children – an over emphasis on 'pace' may cause problems with listening and understanding.

NB The following heritage languages were spoken by children in Group 5's settings: Greek; Welsh; Polish; Bengali (including different dialects); Punjabi; Somali; Ukrainian; Urdu; Arabic; Dutch; Swedish; French; Malay; Russian; Chinese.

**Leader: Avril Brock**

**Scribe: Branwen Llewellyn-Jones**

## **DISCUSSION GROUP SIX**

### **The importance of 'additional extras': storytelling, music, role play, etc.**

The group discussed the following key points:

- It is important that these areas (storytelling, role play, music, etc.) provide opportunities for all children to practise/extend their current learning and for practitioners to assess 'where next';
- These 'extras' (if that's what they are!) are fun – learning without them can shut out many children and bore many others;
- These 'extras' should be offered daily to all children as part of the learning environment/experiences;
- Settings/schools need skilful, knowledgeable practitioners who understand the need for these 'extras' and who give the children the time and space to explore, discover and extend their learning;
- There is a need to convince heads/managers and other key stages staff that these 'extras' should follow through into all other key stages so that children have opportunities to become independent and creative learners, who enjoy their learning.

The group raised the following issues:

- If these 'extras' are only used as a 'carrot' to complete work, the children will not value them and so miss out on so many learning experiences;
- The 'extras' help children make connections between different areas of learning;
- The 'extras' provide wonderful opportunities for observation and assessment as children are often more relaxed and so will display their abilities more readily;
- The 'extras' provide opportunities for creative and imaginative play, vital if we want children to become good writers, speakers and readers;
- What happens when children leave the FS? Fears were expressed that, having helped children become independent, creative and happy learners, the following key stages often 'squash' these attributes from children;
- The 'extras' provide excellent opportunities for documenting what actually happens with young children – for OfSTED, etc.;
- There is a need for strong, knowledgeable individuals in the early years to stand up to top-down pressures – we also need leaders who do more than pay lip service to the FS!
- Practitioners must be aware of their own learning styles/interests – they should not omit activities they don't like or find difficult;
- Timetable, environment and resources can all restrict the use of the 'extras' in the FS and certainly beyond into the other key stages.

***Leader and Scribe: Bryonie Williams***

## **DISCUSSION GROUP SEVEN**

### **Literacy can be fun? The play debate**

The group discussed the following key points:

- Are the synthetic phonics schemes and their teaching methods really playful or fun?
- Definitions of play, systematic teaching, literacy, etc. are all needed if we are to answer our discussion group question and be led into playful teaching;
- Do practitioners really understand how to play **real** play activities/experiences, or are they more concerned with 'teaching'?
- Do practitioners have sufficient knowledge of learning, teaching and child development to implement/deliver the early stages of phonics/literacy?

- Playful teaching is not the same as playful learning – practitioners need to understand (and reflect on) the differences;
- Can everything be ‘delivered’ through play/playful approaches, or are there aspects of learning which need direct teaching?
- Practitioners need to develop their abilities to engage in sustained shared thinking with children (alongside play and child-initiated experiences);
- Practitioners need to be able to understand, identify and decode the wide range of ways in which children communicate with us;
- Practitioners should observe children’s play whenever possible in order to convince themselves (and others, e.g. parents) of the importance of play to learning and development;
- There is a need once and for all to quash the notion that ‘earlier is better’ when it comes to young children.

The group raised the following issues:

- The key role of the adult in adult-directed and child-initiated play;
- The kinds of training needed in relation to children’s literacy and play;
- The ERDP pilot project that had used the FS principles as the starting point and how this had a positive impact on children in all schools and on teacher confidence. (ERDP was part of a whole school approach);
- Government and parental pressure on settings to impose more formal learning and teaching on young children must be resisted – how? Through improved training and extension of practitioners’ knowledge about child development and the FS curriculum;
- The perceived need for managers/leaders in schools/settings to understand the FS principles more clearly and to support that practice;
- Media interpretations of aspects of learning/teaching are not helpful;
- The need to involve children in organising their own learning and to reflect on it;
- The need for competent, confident, knowledgeable teachers/practitioners who can articulate FS principles to management (and politicians!);
- Training issues are paramount in ensuring that practitioners understand how to teach literacy appropriately and effectively. This is especially true of NVQ.

**Leader: Janet Moyles**  
**Scribe: Pat Medland**

## **DISCUSSION GROUP EIGHT**

### **Many meanings, many ways: children’s early marks and symbols**

The group discussed the following key points:

- Practitioners need to provide evidence – and have the knowledge and language as ‘ammunition’ – to underpin, explain and demonstrate good practice in mark-making and its importance;
- Practitioners need to be confident and competent to do what they know is appropriate for children in relation to mark-making and to explore and share knowledge with parents and others;
- The vital need for training about mark-making in particular and overall child development (although concept of ‘developmental stages’ is debatable);
- The vital need to upgrade the status of e.y. field as well as the pay/status of practitioners, otherwise where is the incentive to train and develop?
- Commitment by the government to use, e.g. the transformation fund for training;
- Practitioners need to ensure that mark-making is involved in all activities and in play provision, especially role play, and involve children in setting it up;
- Children must be involved in physical activities that help them to understand letter shapes, directionality, etc;

- Practitioners need to be made to reflect on children's experiences as a way of empowering them to better understanding;
- Observation is a specialist skill that needs to be taught to practitioners/teachers, including Level 2 and 3 practitioners.

The group raised the following issues:

- Leaders/managers should be asked to put on rubber gloves and thread a needle – an adult learning activity – to enable better understanding of what young children might experience;
- Offer adults scruffy pencils and obscure worksheets and note responses, e.g. 'What am I supposed to do?'
- What can we do about worksheets? They are prominent in private sector but also occur in state schools, possibly as a result of management and parental pressures;
- Concerns were expressed about 18 month-olds colouring in shapes rather than using real objects;
- Concerns at young children 'tracing' letters/shapes, rather than making their own marks;
- Worksheets appear to be linked to checklist assessments – concerns that practitioners do not gather evidence from children's play of their early mark-making and symbols;
- Different cultural expectations of some families show that they do not understand play practices – hard to convince parents of what matters.

**Leader: Deirdre Cook**  
**Scribe: Stephanie Mathivet**

## **DISCUSSION GROUP NINE**

### **Getting Talking**

The group discussed the following key points:

- The importance of talking with babies and their right to be treated as a whole person to be communicated with;
- The importance of valuing the nature of communication with babies (eye contact, movement, etc.)
- Workforce issues – the need for core/life skills plus an ability to empathise with babies and enjoy their company;
- The need for allowing time for effective communication.

The group raised the following issues:

- Childcare is seen as low status/low paid, and perceived as an 'easy option' – the youngest people often work with the youngest children;
- Training is important: practitioners need knowledge of how babies develop;
- Age-group separation (e.g. baby rooms) are not ideal and can restrict development: children lose out on language opportunities available in 'family groupings'. The reasons for age-separation include health and safety, tradition and ease of management;
- The self-esteem/confidence of practitioners an important factor in their ability to communicate effectively with young children;
- Babies are often viewed as passive learners/communicators – quite wrongly!
- Curricular guidance can be misinterpreted (e.g. some advisors recommend two hours of 'teaching' for 2.5 year olds);
- Enjoyment, empathy and 'spark' are central in communicating with young children.

**Leader: Claire Mould**  
**Scribe: Bryonie Williams**

## **DISCUSSION GROUP TEN**

## Training issues in the literacy/reading debate

The group discussed the following key points:

- We need to take the good points from the official documents and ignore those parts that we consider to be clearly 'rot'. Use the good aspects wisely and age-specifically;
- Phonics should be seen as part of a wider pedagogical approach that is about play, fun, active learning, connection, etc;
- Connectedness – is there 'joined-upness' between the sectors?
- ..
- ..

The group raised the following issues:

- The message that the Primary Strategy IS statutory and must be 'delivered';
- There is a need for consistency of messages for ITE/Primary/Early Childhood Courses – what should they do?
- There is a perceived entitlement to use Jolly Phonics in early provision in private sector because parents are paying for the provision;
- Is there joined-up thinking between sectors? There appears not to be which causes difficulties in training;
- Concern was expressed about the age-effectiveness of 'trendy' phonics (e.g. Jolly Phonics). Teaching of JP is starting too early!
- How do we give teachers the strength of understanding and confidence about children learning to read? Challenge for ITE/other training;
- How much is the NPQH training about approaches to literacy? What message is given here as gatekeepers of a school's curriculum?
- Qualifications/backgrounds of Centre managers and voluntary sector – what education experiences in appointing staff and steering the curriculum?
- EYP status – its place in the Foundation Stage?
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**Leader: Pat Broadhead**  
**Scribe: Jonathan Doherty**