

Reading and Writing in Primary Schools: Processes, practices and priorities

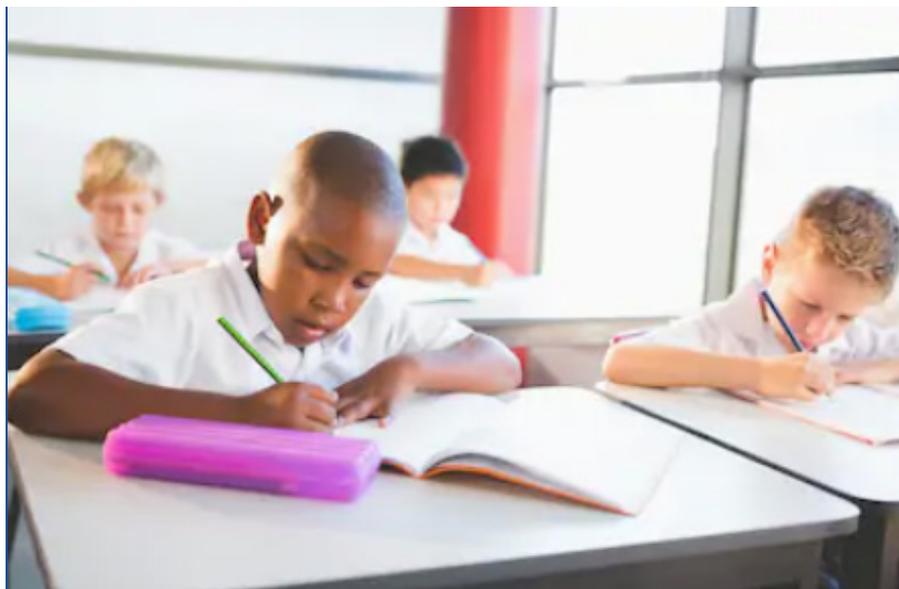
*Roger Beard, Emeritus Professor of Primary Education
UCL Institute of Education, London*



Reading and writing in primary schools may appear to be an easy topic. Both involve the use of alphabet letters on page or screen. People seem to use these skills effortlessly. These skills lie at the heart of the National Curriculum. So, what is there to be concerned about?

In fact, there is plenty to be concerned about. Reading and writing are both more complex than is often realised. Many people are not as proficient as they might be, lacking the awareness of how to 'up their game' when faced with densely-written texts or demanding writing tasks. Furthermore, the teaching of reading and writing has been beset by debates and disagreements. Debates have been further clouded by the compression of reading and writing into the more general term 'literacy'. While the use of this term draws attention to the interdependence of the two skills, it can detract from an appreciation of the very different processes that they comprise. In addition, new forms of literacy have evolved, particularly digital ones, and literacy has been

Reading and writing in primary schools can benefit enormously from the recognition of the underlying processes of comprehension and composition, helping teachers to strike a balance between shared, guided and independent work in teaching and learning.



increasingly bound up with other multi-modal forms of communication. Nevertheless, written language remains the preferred mode for political and cultural successⁱ.

Processes

More particularly, it is not widely appreciated *how* much research there has been into how we read and write. For many years reading was widely held to be a ‘psycholinguistic guessing game’. Sequences of words were predicted and checked out, with less attention to decoding them. Comprehension was deemed to be relatively straightforward. In the 1990s, a ‘paradigm shift’ occurred. While accepting that there are several key skills in reading, it was recognised that they are anchored in fast, automatic decoding of visually unfamiliar words. Comprehension was also seen as more context-dependent and strongly influenced by what the reader brings to the textⁱⁱ.

The writing process was similarly seen as having more to it than previously thought. Transcription skills, accurately getting the right words on the page or screen in the right order, are of course, crucial. Yet the quality and effectiveness of the text is built on less obvious processes: generating ideas and composing the content. The drafted text has then to be read and re-read, to ensure that it reflects the right ‘genre’ features for what is being communicated. Shrewd re-reading also allows the text to be checked with a ‘writer’s alertness to technique’ⁱⁱⁱ.

Successive versions of the National Curriculum have never quite got it right on reading and writing in primary schools. The first (1989) version was rather vague; the oral building block of the English alphabetic writing system, the phoneme, was not specifically

mentioned until the 1999 version. The current National Curriculum has extraordinary detail compared with previous versions. A preoccupation with such minutiae risks losing sight of the purposes and pleasures of learning to read and write.

Reading and writing in primary schools can benefit enormously from the recognition of the underlying processes of comprehension and composition. Such a recognition helps the teacher to strike a balance between shared, guided and independent work in teaching and learning. Also, in teacher education, thinking about the processes can extend to useful self-reflection about how we ourselves go about tackling a demanding book or a challenging writing task. Such reflection can add conviction to classroom practice.

Practices

Reading and writing in primary schools have not always represented established good practice from across the world. About 25 years ago, it was recognised that all was not well. The teaching of early reading was excessively individualised, often comprising little more than children being heard read from reading scheme books. The teaching of writing largely comprised the setting of one-off tasks or exercises that were then marked for accuracy. Fired by the modest performance of UK countries in international comparisons of pupil performance, central government introduced a National Literacy Strategy (NLS) for England^{iv}. The NLS



The current regulations require about half of this time to be spent in schools, the time left to study specific curriculum areas is extremely limited, perhaps just a few hours.

fore-grounded teaching approaches as never before and highlighted the importance of teachers' pedagogical knowledge in unprecedented ways. It drew attention to the centuries-old dilemma of 'not knowing what you don't know' and raised important questions about what counts as attainment and development^v.

Compared with reading, relatively little work has been done on how writing develops over time. In a repeat-design project on the narrative and persuasive writing of 112 children, over a twelve-month period in the 9-11 age-range, the greatest gains were found in the use of genre features. In narrative, these included the elaboration of a character through action, a more detailed main event and the use of dialogue in the resolution. In persuasive writing (the writing of an advertisement), these included

maintaining an advertisement style throughout, the inclusion of more persuasive points, snappy summaries and more precise details of the product being advertised^{vi}. One of the unexpected findings was how much 'language play' the children used, particularly because it was unprompted. Language play involves creative or unusual uses of language that are beyond what is essentially required. Examples include alliteration, repetition, hyperbole, metaphors, similes and all kinds of vivid vocabulary.^{vii}

Priorities

Three priorities have arisen in my recent work: insufficient time in primary initial teacher training, the quality of current phonics teaching and the need for the full potential of the communicative community of the primary school to be recognised.

About ten years ago, the Institute of Education was funded by the European Parliament to undertake a study of primary training in 27 European countries. It was found that the UK was the only country to use a consecutive, rather than a concurrent, approach, resulting in a one-year course or other equivalents. With current regulations requiring about half of this time to be spent in schools, the time left to study specific curriculum areas is extremely limited, perhaps just a few hours.^{viii}

Quality issues in the teaching of phonics came to the fore in my work with a small panel of independent evaluators of publishers' self-assessments of their programmes. The self-assessment dealt with how programmes met criteria set out in the Rose Review. The panel had the opportunity to scrutinise over a hundred phonics programmes and found linguistic errors and misunderstandings in over half of them. Some errors were seriously misleading, for example, stating that the word 'fish' has four phonemes (it has only three, <sh> being a digraph). A recent article discusses this unfortunate situation and what schools might do about it.^x

Finally, in the many articles and books on children's reading and writing, there is often a surprising lack of attention to a distinctive feature of primary education in the UK, the class teacher system. While it does require polymathic teachers, with wide-ranging subject knowledge, it does also offer



substantial opportunities for creating mutually supportive communities of young readers and writers, whose significance has been recognised in research reviews from both quantitative^{xi} and qualitative^{xii} studies.

Reading and writing are all about communication. Reading involves making sense of what someone else has written, often to inform or entertain us. Writing involves using words on page or on screen to communicate with someone who may be distant in space and time. These communication processes will gain in credibility if the practices that support them engage with the social context in which they are used.

Pen Portrait

Roger Beard is Emeritus Professor of Primary Education at the UCL Institute of Education. Before this, he taught in primary schools, in a college of higher education and at the University of Leeds. He has published extensively on literacy education and led research projects funded by the ESRC, the DfE and the European and Brazilian Parliaments.

The next Bulletin in this series will be published on 1 April 2019

Ruth Dann

Associate Professor of Education
Department of Curriculum,
Pedagogy and Assessment
UCL Institute of Education, London

On: **'Feedback for Learning: reconciling policy and practice in the classroom'**.

References

- i) Kress, G. (2003) *Literacy in the new media age*, p.1. London: Routledge.
- ii) Oakhill, J. and R. Beard (eds) (1999) *Reading development and the teaching of reading*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- iii) Beard, R. (2000a) *Developing writing 3-13*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- iv) Beard, R. (2000b) 'Research and the National Literacy Strategy', *Oxford Review of Education*, 26, 3 and 4, 421-436.
- v) Earl, L., N. Watson, B. Levin, K. Leithwood, M. Fullan and N. Torrance (2003) *Watching and learning 3: Final report of the external evaluation of England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies*. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- vi) Beard, R. and A. Burrell. (2010) 'Investigating narrative writing by 9-11 year olds', *Journal of Research in Reading* 33, 1, 77-93; Beard, R., A. Burrell and M. Homer (2016) 'Investigating persuasive writing by 9-11 year olds', *Language and Education* 30, 5, 417-437. doi:10.1080/09500782.2015.1133638.
- vii) Burrell, A. and R. Beard (2016) 'Playing with words: investigating the use of language play in the persuasive writing of 9-11-year-olds'. *Education 3-13*, doi:10.1080/03004279.2016.1217250; Burrell, A. and R. Beard (2017) 'Language play in the narrative writing of 9-11-year-olds', *Education 3-13*, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2017.1316511; Beard, R. and A. Burrell (in preparation) *Language play and children's literacy*. London: UCL IoE Press.
- viii) Institute of Education (Beard, R. and D. Crooks) (2008) *Content and quality of teacher education across the European Union*. Brussels: European Parliament. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL-CULT_ET(2008)397251 Accessed 4 February 2019]
- ix) Rose, J. (2006) *Independent review of the teaching of early reading*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- x) Beard, R., G. Brooks and J. Ampaw-Farr (2018) 'How linguistically informed are phonics programmes?' *Literacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12147>
- xi) Graham, S., A. Bollinger, C. Booth Olson, C. D'Aoust, C. MacArthur, D. McCutchen and N. Olinghouse (2012) *Teaching elementary school pupils to be effective writers: A practice guide* (NCEE 2012-4058). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. [Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/practiceguide/writing_pg_062612.pdf Accessed 5 February 2019]
- xii) Duke, N.K. and D.P. Pearson (2002) 'Effective practices for developing reading comprehension'. In S.J. Samuels and A.E. Farstrup (eds) *What research has to say about reading instruction*. Newark: International Reading Association.

Feedback

- Tell us what you think about our Bulletins.
- Tell your friends and colleagues about ASPE and get them to join us.

Email us on ASPEinfo@aol.com

What does ASPE do for those in Primary Education?

We...

- promote informed and reflective study on practice that affects children's learning;
- encourage collaboration between colleagues in schools and universities;
- hold events which promote the best in researched practice;
- provide informed commentary on education policy issues;
- commission publications, including the international journal *Education 3-13*, written by leading researchers and practitioners.

