

Nedenstående er Diane McGuinness' kommentarer til Underhusets videnskabs og teknologi komitè's rapport: Evidence Check 1: Early Literacy Interventions.

Second Report of Session 2009-10

Memorandum submitted by Diane McGuinness (LI 13)

PREFACE

I would like to take the name of this committee literally and assume that most members, perhaps all, understand and are committed to the scientific method. Unless we abide by this method, we can never solve the problem of reading failure in English speaking countries which has persisted for over 100 years. There is no place, no time, for armchair theories, false speculations, and bogus terms like “dyslexia” which explain nothing and only disguise our ignorance. Let us begin by exploring its real meaning and relevance. Then we can address what is really going on.

1. DYSLEXIA MEANS “POOR READER” IN GREEK

That is all it means. Bona fide scientific research over the past three decades shows that no reading test can distinguish a “garden variety poor reader” from someone “diagnosed dyslexic.” A poor reader is a poor reader is a poor reader, and this is true at any age. The recent *Rose report (2009)* muddles this term, referring on the one hand to serious cognitive delays in language function, and on the other to the literal meaning above. There is considerable evidence against a special reading disorder due to a brain dysfunction, and absolutely none to support it. A writing system is not, and cannot be, a “property of the human brain”. It is an invention of the human mind. And like similar inventions—musical notation, mathematic symbols, computer languages—it has to be taught. (Who would suggest we label people who struggle with reading musical notation as having “dysmusia,” or as being unmusical?)

2. SOME SIMPLE FACTS

- (a) If reading difficulties occur because of a genetic disorder, why is there no “dyslexia” in countries with a transparent alphabet code (a one-to-one correspondence between a letter and the sound it represents) like Finland, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, Korea, etc. In these countries, the term “dyslexia” either doesn't exist or means something else. In Austria, a “dyslexic” child reads and spells perfectly, but does so extremely slowly.
- (b) Over the past two decades many outstanding reading programmes have been created for teaching beginning readers and poor readers of all ages. The basis of these programmes are described in the *Rose Review (2006)*. These programmes teach the English alphabet code (no sight words, no guessing). Children taught with these programmes at Reception are one to two years above reading and spelling norms. It is rare for a child to fail. There are programmes older poor readers of any age, who can be taught to read and spell in about 18–24 hours of one-to-one tutoring. Whether or not they have been diagnosed “dyslexic” makes no difference. Where does the “dyslexia” go, when these people learn to read?

3. “EVERY CHILD A READER”

Here is an example of our ignorance and the failure to insist on proper scientific evidence in making critical decisions. This project was supported by the government, and funded by the tax payer with support from KPMG and Esmee Fairbairn. It resurrects the old, failed Reading Recovery programme that relies mainly on sight word memorization (see submission from Jennifer Chew for details). Several years ago, a letter was

sent to members of the US Congress with 31 signatures of the top researchers in the field of reading urging Congress to suspend support for RR because independent research showed the method had no effect. It is extremely costly to implement, re teacher training, tutoring time, and materials. Not only this, but RR “research” is notorious for misrepresenting the data. In a recent publication by the Institute of Education, the same problems appear.

1. Nearly half of the children from the 145 strong “RR-tutoring group” were dropped from the study at post-testing, while the control group remained intact. (Barely a mention of this, and no attempt to solve the problem this creates.)

2. The RR group received individual tutoring, the control group got none. One could go on. The published paper bears the hallmarks of a bona fide “scientific” journal, until a closer inspection reveals it is published by Reading Recovery. No chance for an impartial peer review process here.

4. WHAT IS A WRITING SYSTEM?

(a) Five thousand years ago scholars in Egypt and Sumer discovered that people can’t learn a writing system which uses a separate symbol for every word. There are too many words (one million words in the English language). To solve this problem, new symbols were designed to represent sounds in words, because there are far fewer sounds than words in every language. From this time forward, ALL writing systems were based on units of speech below the level of the word. (This is the only way they can work.) These are four units of speech used today in the world’s writing systems. These systems are never mixed:

1. symbols for syllables (syllabaries—China).
2. symbols for CV units (diphone systems—most non-European countries).
3. symbols for CC units only (consonantal alphabets—Hebrew, Arabic).
4. symbols for each consonant and vowel: (alphabets—invented by the Greeks in the 8th century BC).

(b) All codes are reversible by definition, which means spelling and reading are mirror images of one another. They should never be taught separately as if they had nothing to do with each other (a common practice in our schools.)

(c) A “transparent” writing system assigns a single symbol to one and only one sound in the language. Finland and Korea have the most transparent writing systems in the world. This is why children in Finland start school at age 7 and are reading and spelling accurately by Xmas. No further lessons are required. This is true in all countries with well-behaved writing systems like those listed above.

(NB A recent paper by the Dept of Ed at Cambridge, 600 pages long, uses this fact about Finland to argue that English children should NOT be taught to read until age six, but should “play” instead! They actually believe the reason is “developmental”, when learning is a function of the complexity of the writing system and how it is taught.)

5. WHY ENGLISH SPEAKING CHILDREN ARE AT A DISADVANTAGE

The English writing system is one of the most opaque writing systems in the world. It has multiple spellings for the same sound, and multiple “decodings” of the same spellings. This is the reason English speaking children have such difficulty learning to read and spell, and it is the only difficulty. The reasons are historical. English is an amalgam of five languages introduced by foreign invaders who came ashore with their five different writing/spelling systems. For centuries, these languages and their spelling systems occupied different ecological niches. But as language barriers began to collapse and merge, spelling went haywire. Nobody could solve this problem until Samuel Johnson took it on in 1755. But Johnson was only able to standardize the spelling for sounds in individual words. He failed totally to standardize the spellings for the 40+ sounds in our language. This failing makes our writing system, not only unstable, but context dependent. It matters what word a spelling is “sitting in”: “theme” is not spelled “them” or “theam” though it could be. This problem is solved by programmes which highlight these features and common spelling patterns, and are written by authors who truly understand the code and its idiosyncrasies.

6. OUR MOST URGENT NEED

A plea for teacher training. I have talked to teachers all over the country in almost every setting from reception to further ed colleges to the prison system. All report the same thing. None had any training whatsoever in college in how to teach reading. They had no idea our alphabetic writing systems is a code, much less what this code looks like. Teachers must have proper training in these successful new programmes, otherwise we will never solve the problem of the huge illiteracy rate in English speaking countries. Teachers trained in these methods need to be supported by the Head and other staff, which is not always the case.