

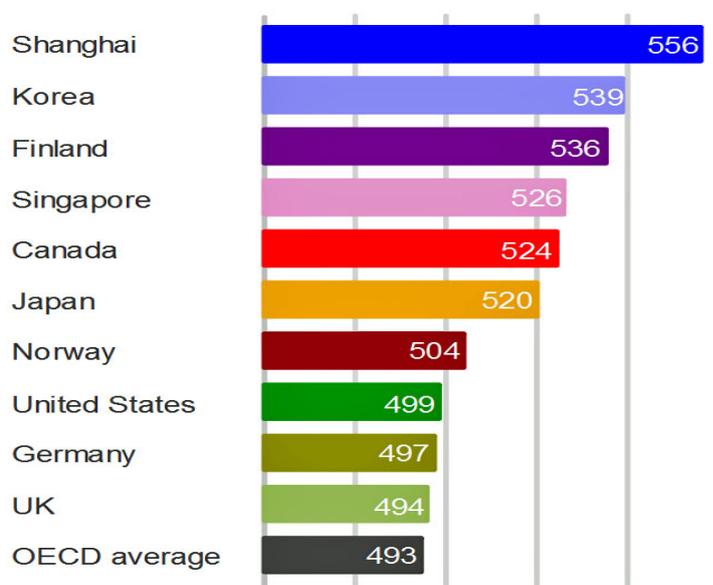
Education Committee  
**DfE use of Evidence**

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On behalf of the Save Childhood Movement  
Early Years Education (EYE) Academic Advisory Group  
[www.savechildhood.net](http://www.savechildhood.net)

**Phonics: Issues and Evidence**

Both research and practice show that, in a language such as English, the use of systematic synthetic phonics teaching is a highly valuable component of initial literacy teaching and learning (DFE 2014). There does not, however, appear to be any robust evidence showing that children benefit from formal instruction in phonics (sound-symbol correspondences; blending/segmenting words) before the age of five, or even before the age of seven. On the contrary; research by Suggate et al (2012) shows no significant difference in English-speaking children’s attainment in literacy at the age of 11, whether reading instruction begins at five or seven. Clark (2015) proposes that while the use of phonics is effective within a broad programme of initial literacy teaching and learning, there is no evidence to support the use of phonics as a ‘stand alone’ teaching strategy, or to indicate the superiority of synthetic phonics over analytic phonics.

There is also a wide range of international evidence suggesting that an early start on formal learning, and a highly abstract ‘transmission’ approach to education in general is detrimental in terms of social and emotional development and children’s long-term mental health (e.g., House, 2011, Jarvis et al 2014) Countries where formal education begins at six or seven tend to have better outcomes than the UK, not only in terms of childhood well-being (UNICEF 2007; 2013) but specifically on international comparisons of literacy achievement (PISA 2009). Children in nations placed at the top of this chart (Shanghai China, Korea and Finland) are not admitted to a formal education system until they have reached the age of 7, while the others placed directly above the UK have a school starting age of 6.



PISA Reading skills 2009, selected countries above OECD average

If the hugely different cultures represented at the top of this achievement chart are considered, the linking factor would appear to be that, up to seven years of age, the later the start to formal education, the more secure the eventual literacy skills.

We need to recognise that verbal and non-verbal meanings develop from organic social interactions in which children freely respond to partners with whom they are conversing, and that 'transmission based' instruction given by an adult in a classroom setting is not of similar value in the development of deep understanding of self and others.

Jarvis et al (2014, p.290)

This concept can be found within the vast body of the research cited in the Rose Report, undertaken for the New Labour Government of 1997-2010. Rose concludes that that phonics teaching should take place in 'a language-rich environment' (DFE 2006, p.16). This is also stressed in the EPSE research (the importance of 'sustained shared thinking'; see EPPE, 2004) linking high-quality preschool provision to long-term educational achievement. This is particularly the case for the increasing numbers of children speaking English as an additional language – estimated at 1.1 million in 2014 (Paton 2014 online) – who need time to develop their own language skills, as well as settling into school, before embarking on an in-depth analysis of the phonetic structure of the written word in their second or possibly even third language.

In the European countries with better literacy and well-being scores than the UK, it is usual for children to spend around three years (from age 3 to 6 or 7) in a 'language-rich' pre-school environment, with plenty of opportunities to tune into sound through music and singing, and to become familiar with the vocabulary and language patterns of narrative through stories and drama (Palmer, 2015). This also provides them with time for play, which is linked to greater well-being and improved learning dispositions (Jarvis, Newman and Swiniarski 2014). Teachers can of course draw on a range of play-based teacher-directed activities to familiarise children with phonetic and grammatical information, but these are play-based and adapted to children's individual level of language development and emotional maturity, embedding language within a more organic structure in terms of everyday activities. As Rosen proposes:

Reading is much more than 'sounding out' or 'reading out loud'. In short, it's reading with understanding. This is the long term aim of all researchers, teachers and children in relation to reading. Otherwise, there really is no point.....Learning to read involves 'getting' all this - being able to make transitions between these different codes., or at best being able to talk one code and write another.

Rosen (2014a online)

Phonics teaching on its own cannot and does not enable children to read, in the full sense of taking meaning from the words of another person, communicated in writing rather than speech. What has to take place is an engagement with 'meaning' and 'understanding' ie with the power of people to use words to affect and interest others. If this is not realised, what happens is that children may be enabled to 'sound out' or 'decode' but not to understand what the full skill of *reading* entails.

In England, however, the requirements of the Foundation Profile at five, and the Year 1 Phonics test at six, have meant that practitioners feel obliged to introduce much more formal instruction, often from the age of three, introducing children to abstract ideas about language analysis before many of them are confident speakers of English. The authors of

this document have professional experience of nurseries and daycare centres where children are being formally introduced to phonics around the second birthday, before they have even developed fluent speech. The introduction of a baseline assessment at four is likely to exacerbate this trend.

The argument that is typically put forward for such a practice is that since English is a phonetically difficult language, children need to start learning the rules as soon as possible. The evidence above, however, suggests that the reverse is more likely to be the case: since English is a phonetically-difficult language, learning highly abstract rules relating to the written word should not take place until children are linguistically, socially and emotionally mature enough to benefit. Success tends to breed further success (and interest) in literacy, while early failure may damage the disposition to learn.

It is therefore time to challenge the current use of data to support assertions such as 'Research shows that unless children have mastered the basic skills by the age of seven, they find it difficult to catch up' (Ofsted, 2013). Our interpretation of the evidence is that children who are required to 'master' basic skills before they have the cognitive capacity to succeed are set up for long-term failure.

Jarvis, Newman and George propose that, instead of desperately clamouring for 'quick fixes' that move children ever more quickly through their development and education, government education policies should conversely be focused upon:

The pursuit of developing culturally relevant opportunities for children to learn through genuine, organic, collaborative free play and open-ended discovery activities, alongside gradually more structured programmes of learning as they move into mid-childhood and adolescence.

(Jarvis, Newman and George 2014, p.296)

As reading is a core skill that enables human beings to engage both with the stored body of human knowledge and the increasingly internationalised, online society of the present and potentially the future, the consequences for a nation whose literacy policy is losing its way are potentially devastating. As such it is vital that we 'stop the rot' that is already seeping in. Jarvis (2009) reported the following, drawn from some small-scale research of children undertaking a 'reading recovery' scheme in a small number of secondary schools:

While many of the participants proposed that the reading that they were required to do at school was dull, difficult and boring, they also reported prolific out-of-school engagement with social media activities requiring competency in literacy-based communication skills..... Many of the sample were also keen readers of magazines, comics and horror novels. One 14-year-old girl smiled at the researcher's question about how 'school' reading could be made more interesting and softly commented 'but really, it's just education in the end, isn't it?'

Jarvis (2009, pp. 71-72)

At the primary stage, the evidence is even more worrying. There are currently early indications that children who are good readers are failing the statutory phonics check introduced at the beginning of Key Stage 1 within England's education system.

Many schools commented that the check, with its focus on decontextualised decoding, goes against everything the children have been taught. "Many children reading well above their chronological age did not pass the test". Children who had no knowledge of reading and had just learnt phonics did better

(UKLA 2012, p.2)

The reason for this is that fluent readers do not only use phonics, but the shape of a word (the basis of look-say), which increases reading speed; see this well known example that became an internet meme:

Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at CmabrigdeUinervtisy, it deosn'tmttaer in wahtoredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olnyiprmoatnttihng is taht the frist and lsatltteers be at the rghitpclae. The rset can be a toatlmses and you can sitllraed it wouthitporbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huammniddeos not raederveylteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe."

(Know your meme 2014, online)

The Cambridge Review of Primary Education, undertaken in 2009 reflects:

While phonics may develop the skills of reading, children may be disinclined to use them unless their reading experiences encourage autonomy, enthusiasm, achievement and a sense of enjoyment. UKLA [the UK Literacy Association] identified a 'simple' view of reading in official discourse that appears to decouple decoding from comprehension.

(Cambridge Review 2009, p.24)

Following on from the point that Jarvis' young interview participant made about school set reading being boring, the Cambridge Review reflected:

How can we continue to design an English curriculum which marginalises the role that reading and telling stories has to play in children's cognitive, social and emotional development? Whilst this will clearly not be the experience for all children or for all teachers, the fact that it occurs in any primary school in the 21st century is a scandal and needs to be a priority for review.... The method of teaching reading has been subject to increased control by government ... Teachers are required to adopt the 'synthetic phonics' approach to the teaching of reading, a recommendation which continues to be contentious and some argue is not supported by sufficient research evidence.

(Cambridge Review 2009, p.24-25)

The narrow focus on phonics is an increasingly worrying element of a steady reduction of meaningful activity within state education in England, and it is beyond time for this to be discussed by both policy creators and academics within an environment where both sides are genuinely listening to what the others have to say. Clark (2015, p.9) reflects 'lacking so far is any assessment of the effects of these developments of young children's experiences of and attitudes towards literacy.'

With regard to literacy, it is surely part of commonsense knowledge to realise that the point of reading is not to break down the phonetic structure of the language on the page, but a type of communication that only human beings can undertake, where a writer, who is not present in the environment of the reader, can never-the-less share thoughts with him/her; this is the foundation of modern human civilisation.

Jarvis (2009, p.74) reflected that while written language is the vehicle through which 'the sum of human achievement to become[s] cumulative across generations; in the classical

quote that derives from Greek and Latin scholars, to “stand upon the shoulders of giants...” this process is currently in danger of being hampered by ‘education regimes which reify the transmission of disjointed ‘chunks’ of knowledge.’ An obsession with phonics in the teaching of literacy is just one example of this problem, however, it does however have the potential to be the most devastating education policy mistake of all, if it creates a significant dip in the literacy levels of the state-educated population as a whole.

As Rosen (2014, online) proposes, a good start to rectifying this situation would be for schools to ensure that there is ‘at least one time every week where children will have nothing else to do with a book other than to read it, listen to it, and chat about it in an open-ended way.’ He elaborated on this in his delivery of the 2014 Hay Lecture:

"We're talking about reading for pleasure, but what an odd thing to have to campaign for."It's kind of like saying 'Let's campaign for air, or for nice soup'....."

Explaining the tests children now have to undergo, Rosen said: "If you're lucky enough to be in Year One, you know that the place they are spending millions and millions is on something called systematic synthetic phonics. The priority here is to teach children how to 'decode'. This is so important there has to be a decoding test.... We have to be very, very clear that decoding doesn't teach you to understand anything. In fact, I'm not sure it should even be called 'reading'".

(Singh 2014, online)

This is clearly one of the most important ‘discuss’ questions of all for the first Secretary of State for Education, when s/he arrives at the DFE in May 2015.

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## **Contributor bios**

### **Sue Palmer**

Sue Palmer, a former headteacher in Scotland, has written more than 250 books, educational TV programmes and software packages on aspects of literacy. For more than fifteen years she has been a popular speaker on this subject in schools, colleges and universities in the UK and across the world, and a frequent contributor to the educational press, notably the Times Educational Supplement and Child Education.

Her first book for wider audience, *Toxic Childhood* (Orion 2006) about the effects of contemporary childhood on child development and learning, was in the Amazon best-seller charts for two years. It was followed by *Detoxing Childhood* (2007) and *21st Century Boys* (2009). The books have led to involvement in many campaigns related to modern childhood, and invitations to speak to a wide range of audiences, including health, social work and criminal justice professionals, playworkers, planners, advertisers and parents. They have also led to many articles and interviews in the national press, as well as frequent TV and radio appearances.

Sue has acted over the years as an independent consultant to many organisations, including the Department for Education and Skills, the Basic Skills Agency, the National Literacy Trust and the BBC. In recent years she's been an independent consultant on childhood issues to the Conservative Party in England, the Labour Party in Scotland and the National Childcare Committee in Ireland. She's twice been listed by the *Evening Standard* amongst the 1000 most influential people in London (which gives her great pleasure, since she lives in Edinburgh) and described in *The Scotsman* as one of Scotland's 'new radical thinkers'.

She has earned a living as an entirely freelance writer, consultant and speaker for twenty-five years. She designed and wrote several literacy training packages for the Department for Education and Skills in England, including co-authorship of the National Literacy Strategy Grammar for Writing training on which UK primary teachers were retrained in the teaching of English grammar. Recent educational publications include *Literacy What Works* (co-written with Pie Corbett for Nelson Thornes), *How to teach cross-curricular writing and Speaking Frames* (Routledge) the hugely popular Skeleton poster books, OHTs and CDROMs (TTS) which are one of the best-selling UK educational resources, used in over 10,000 schools, and *Foundations of Literacy* (written with Early Years specialist Ros Bayley for Network Continuum).

### **Dr Pam Jarvis, Leeds Trinity University**

Dr Pam Jarvis is both a historian and a graduate psychologist, and her key research focus is that of 'well being' in education across all age ranges and academic levels. She has many years of experience of creating and teaching developmental, social science and social policy modules for Education/ Child Development programmes in higher education. She has Qualified Teacher Status (secondary) and was awarded a PhD by Leeds Metropolitan University in 2005 for her thesis 'The Role of Rough and Tumble Play in Children's Social and Gender Role Development in The Early Years of Primary School'.

Before joining Leeds Trinity, she led the postgraduate programme in Early Childhood Studies and the Early Years Professional Status Project at Margaret McMillan School of Teaching, Health and Care in the Bradford College University Centre. She has been an Open University Associate Lecturer since 1997, and is currently working on the Masters in Education/ Masters in Childhood and Youth module 'Understanding Children's Development and Learning'.

Pam is originally from South London, but has lived in Yorkshire for over 25 years. She has three adult children who provided her initial education relating to the importance of play-based learning within human development, and she continues to learn from observing the play of her two young grandsons.

### **Teaching and Administration**

Pam is currently working in the Department of Children, Families and Young People, delivering modules on the Foundation Degree and the BA (Hons). From September 2014, she will be contributing to the Leeds Trinity University Early Years Teacher Status pathways.

## Research

Pam has been engaged in active research for over twenty years, and is currently concluding a piece of historical research on the life and work of Early Years practice pioneer Margaret McMillan. She is preparing to extend her PhD research, focusing specifically on the original narratives that young children create within their free play. Her theoretical approach is that of human development through biocultural or 'nature via nurture' processes, viewing the evolutionary, biological and social aspects of development as intricately intertwined; this is outlined in her book 'Perspectives on Play'; see below. In the past, she acted as lead researcher on a project that evaluated a reading recovery programme for secondary school pupils within the inner city areas of Leeds, Bradford and Halifax, and a project that investigated the experiences of 'parent learners,' balancing higher education study with the provision of care for dependent children and paid employment.

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