

# THE FAILURE OF POLITICS AND THE PULL OF FREEDOM: REFLECTIONS ON THE WORK OF THE READING REFORM FOUNDATION



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In 1998 I wrote and the Libertarian Alliance published a piece about the teaching of literacy, praising phonics and trashing look-and-say methods (Political Notes No. 29, *On the Harm Done by "Look-and-Say": A Reaction to Bonnie MacMillan's Why School-children Can't Read*). I expressed support for any campaigns that anyone might be running along such lines, and a pro-phonics group called the Reading Reform Foundation got in touch and have sent me issues number 45, 46 and 47 of their *Newsletter*.

As is appropriate, given what the Reading Reform Foundation stands for, there is in these newsletters a satisfyingly bland emphasis on pertinent information conveyed in clear English, and an absence of frantic illustrative enlivenment such as the look-and-say people feel the constant need for. Other than a few graphs and tables, and a couple of illustrations of what children's work looks like when it's being done well, it's all text. And the story told by the text is of a campaign whose members convince me that they know what they are doing and who are doing some good, which is more than you can say for some "campaigners". These people know how to teach children to read and write, and are busily telling others both about all the evidence for this claim, and about how others can also teach children successfully.

## CRACKING THE LITERACY CODE

The doctrine which the Reading Reform Foundation is battling against – "look-and-say" – says that children learn by looking at entire words, or by looking at the first letter and then looking at an accompanying picture. You don't read. You guess.

This doctrine has been a disaster. It has now created several generations of illiterate, "dyslexic" and, in general, badly educated people. The majority of those subjected to this great folly have muddled through, their lives temporarily disrupted but not permanently blighted, or not too badly. They have "cracked" reading, in the manner of Bletchley Park codebreakers. They have "got" the logic of reading despite having had to work it out for themselves. Other lucky people have been remedially taught by their parents in the correct way. But an appallingly large number, especially those without well-educated parents, have not been so lucky. Worse, many of the incompetents who were mistaught this way are now starting seriously to infest the teaching profession itself, there to perpetuate their own confusions. And of course many non-recovered look-and-sayers are now parents, unable to rescue their children from the mess created by their children's teachers, because that mess is all that they themselves now know.

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## "ANALYTIC" VERSUS "SYNTHETIC" PHONICS

Aside from the importance of phonics and the basic wrongness of look-and-say, the technical matter that the Reading Research Foundation most insists upon is the difference between, as they call it, "analytic" phonics and "synthetic" phonics.

Analytic phonics means taking words, and breaking them down into separate letters and noises. To begin teaching reading and writing to children by doing this is apparently not helpful. It doesn't do much harm, but neither does it do much good.

The synthetic phonics approach begins with the separate letters, introduced one at a time, writing each letter – both upper and lower case, naming each letter, and identifying the sound made by each letter. (These last two – the name we call the letter A by, and the sound made by the letter A – are two distinct matters, and not obviously so. Many unfortunates now spend their entire lives not understanding even this basic and crucial distinction.) Pupils are then lead towards assembling letters, and the sounds that the letters together make, into words. This works.

You start with easy letters and sounds where there's no ambiguity, and later you learn the tricky stuff with which the English language especially is so afflicted. You decypher the sound of a word by reading it from beginning to end, rather than merely by noting the first letter and then guessing. You don't guess. You read.

A parallel between teaching reading and writing, and teaching something like the violin, springs to mind. You don't start playing the violin by analysing "real" pieces of music, with all their associated complexities. As a beginner violinist, you start by playing individual notes, starting with the easiest ones, and you play very easy tunes composed and chosen for their easiness rather than their musical profundity. Only much later do you attempt the Beethoven Violin Concerto.

## PERPETUATING FOLLY

Look and say is, thanks to people like those active in the RRF, on the retreat. But since this retreat is being conducted by politicians, and by advisers many of whom created the mess now being retreated from, it is not surprising that the story here is not so encouraging.

In that piece I wrote in 1998 I reported that the present Labour Government has been persuaded of the merits of phonics. Well, individual bits, such as the then Education Minister David Blunkett, may have been, somewhat. But the dominant doctrine at the Department for Education and Science remains more than somewhat look-and-say in its overall approach.

Reading between the lines of what the RRF reports, what seems to be happening is as follows. The phonics-persons have pretty much proved their case, probably even in the eyes of many of the look-and-say people. But the look-and-say "experts" at the DfES are in an arkwad position. (The inverted commas around "experts" being there because these people don't know things which are true, they "know" things which are untrue.) Suppose their bad techniques are completely swept away and completely replaced by completely good ones. The teaching of literacy in schools would leap forward. A mass of seemingly "complex" problems, like the recent huge rise in "dyslexia", the spiralling cost of "special needs" education, and the general inability of several generations of people to learn how to spell, will be revealed as not so complex after all. These problems will be revealed to all as having been caused by the government's own literacy "experts". Thus it is that even – especially – those "experts" who have been completely convinced of the wrongness of their own former opinions now face a huge, career-saving incentive to perpetuate their follies as much as they can, to disguise the enormity of the disaster they have caused.

That's what they've done. The recently launched "National Literacy Strategy" is still heavily polluted with the wrong methods. The teaching of reading and writing is now said to require a "mixture" of phonic and other methods, and is accordingly going to have – is already having – exactly the rather disappointing results that the RRF has been anxiously predicting.

It gets worse. The National Literacy Strategy is being touted by many of those who support it as “phonics in action”, and as those disappointing results duly materialise, this disappointment is going to be held up as proof that “this is a complex issue”, and that “there are no panaceas”. There is no “absolutely right way” to teach liter-acy, and teachers must all just blunder on much as they always have, “guided” by the government in ways that will remain for a long time deeply flawed.

### POLITICAL STREETFIGHTING

Sadly, this political aspect of the schools literacy mess is not one that the RRF people convince me that they now know how to correct.

These phonics-persons seem to have followed the usual procedure followed by people who know more about their own speciality than they do about politics. They have assembled their unanswerable case for the nationalised industry with which they are concerning themselves to stop doing things badly and to start doing things well. The politicians and bureaucrats have had meetings with the phonics-persons, and have nodded encouragingly. And then the politicians and bureaucrats have screwed the phonics-persons.

The phonics-persons are now, I surmise, resorting to trying to “persuade public opinion” to do to the politicians what they, the phonics-persons, could not do, namely beat some sense into them. Hence, I further surmise, the somewhat improved state of their propaganda machine and their willingness and ability to communicate a little more effectively with people such as me, who can supply them with further iotas of “public” support.

But if the RRF are serious about persuading the politicians and the bureaucrats to change their ways, they need to start naming the names of supporters and opponents and itemising speeches and parliamentary statements, if not to all of us in their newsletters and press releases, then at least to themselves, in their private databases. They need a detailed model of victory, and a detailed plan for getting victory.

They need to know which anti-phonics “experts” and enthusiasts are three-quarters persuaded of the case against what they’ve been doing and are wanting now to move things quickly in the right direction. They need to be super-nice to such persons, to be sympathetic for their former enthusiasm, to trumpet support for their obvious goodwill, and to go to their book launches, dinner parties and weddings.

And they need to know which important and enthusiastic anti-phonics “experts” and power-brokers are unbudgeable and to make life hell for them to the point where, although never persuaded, they give up. They must attack such persons not only in RRF publications but on other fronts (like their own university departments, their own constituencies, their own trade union memberships), by isolating them from former supporters, by bullying them with surprise planted questions into making public concessions to sanity and then quoting these concessions back at them and to the entire universe from then on, and by publicising the fact (and I bet it is a fact) that many of these “experts” prefer the best sort of phonics methods when it comes to the education of their own children.

But the RRF people seem mostly to be nice lady schoolteachers, not political streetfighters. Do they have the skills for this kind of operation, or even know anyone who does? Could they afford him if they did? I know someone exactly like this, and he will already have recognised a few of his methods being alluded to in the previous two paragraphs and himself in this sentence. He in his turn knows many more such operators. But these people don’t come cheap and are hard for the untrained eye to distinguish from com-men.

If the RRF don’t have the stomach for such political battling, then frankly I don’t blame them. When people tell me that I ought to be “fighting” for libertarianism by such methods I mutter to myself such things as: “Why don’t you, if you’re so keen on all this stuff?”

### WHY DID THE ANGLOSPHERE DO SO BADLY?

One of the most interesting ideas I got from reading the RRF newsletters concerned the relative difficulty of English compared to many other languages.

Not every person, certainly not every English person, likes German. All those harsh consonants banging and rasping away. All that mucus flying about. It’s an old English claim, only semi-jocular, that no matter what a German is actually talking about it sounds as if he is invading Poland. Maybe so, but not even the most rabid Anglo can deny that knowing what a word sounds like if all you have is the word written out in front of you, or knowing how to spell a word if you only know how it sounds, is a whole lot easier in German than in English.

In her review in RRF *Newsletter* 45 (on page 10) of an article in *The European Journal of the Psychology of Education*, Jennifer Chew writes as follows:

[The author] notes, too, that even with good phonics teaching, the complexity of English letter-sound correspondences makes decoding harder for English children than for German children, but suggests that systematic phonics teaching is all the more important in English, as children are less likely to crack the code by themselves.

When I read this sentence a mass of hitherto mysterious matters suddenly snapped into focus.

For me, one of the great puzzles of the look-and-say disaster has been why on earth this disaster has been so particularly disastrous in the English speaking world, and so much less disastrous elsewhere. As an Englishman, I am not attracted by the idea that we Anglos are just plain dumber than folks in other parts of the world, yet the look-and-say story seems to suggest that overwhelmingly. What other explanation is there for what’s been going on?

The answer, I think, is to be found in the effect that the complexities of English spelling have had both on the disposition of people to accept the look-and-say method in the first place, and on the relative amounts of damage that this method does depending on which language is being taught.

In the Anglosphere, a powerful argument for look-and-say was that since English spelling is so damned arbitrary, why don’t we stop bothering with phonics and just go with the “whole word”? Or to put it even more bluntly: since teaching English is so hard, why don’t we just give up? This is a grotesque mistake, but it is an easier mistake – a more tempting mistake – to make in England than in Germany.

In German, there are virtually no ambiguities like those that so abound in English spelling, so in Germany, letter-to-sound teaching makes perfect sense and is easier to do. So, in Germany, on the whole, they have carried right on with it, and in general, look-and-say caught on less strongly in most countries outside the Anglosphere but with the same alphabet as ours, blessed as these countries mostly are with less confusing spelling systems than ours. (I remember going on a bicycling trip to Finland as a teenager, and being amazed that I could pronounce all Finnish place names correctly, without any exceptions, by simply reading them off the signposts and following the rules. Try doing that in England!)

But even if look-and-say had caught on with equal severity in all countries, it would still have done more damage to the teaching of English than to the teaching of other languages, as the Jennifer Chew quote above explains. For look-and-say to work, its hapless victims have to “get” or “crack” the system they are pitted against, and in English this system is much more difficult to crack, smothered as it is in so many contradictory signals – in so much “noise”, as the information theorists would say. A look-and-say German child is far more likely to “get” how to read German, even if he is not given any more help in this than his wretched counterpart in England, and once he does there are far fewer exceptions to the rules for him to worry about or be humiliated by. (How much

“dyslexia” do they have in Germany? I don’t know, but my guess would be: less than in England.)

### COMPELLED/PERSUADED/ALLOWED

So, if official language teaching in the Anglosphere is likely to remain a big problem for a long time, and if the RRF are no good at politics anyway, what is to be done? What, in particular, should the RRF do? What will they do?

The answer is that they are being steered, by the relative failure of their politicking, and the more modest but still very tangible successes they are already achieving by other means, towards a strategy which, luckily for them, will have more long-term beneficial impact than politicking, no matter how good at politicking they might have been if they’d been different sorts of people to the nice people that they are.

Once again, what they are doing is something that doesn’t come completely naturally to them. At least when it comes to children, these people are natural authoritarians. Nice, but firm.

They prefer “whole class” teaching to individualised one-to-one teaching. After all, if there is a one best way to learn reading and writing, why confine the news to just one child at a time? Teach a whole class at once and achieve economies of scale, for heaven’s sake. Their general attitude of there’s-a-right-way-and-there’s-a-wrong-way predisposes the RRF to take compulsion for granted. Parents should simply be told what works best, which in any case is what most of them are begging to be told, so compulsion isn’t a problem with them. On the contrary, by simply banging on about the right of parents to choose, the desired result is achieved.

And children should simply have what works shoved in front of them, regardless of any inclinations that they might have – a procedure endorsed by most parents. The RRF people are fascinated – quite reasonably – by their own field of expertise and relatively indifferent to any broader concerns about their tactical methods that might spring from a broader interest in political philosophy. As with so many enthusiasts for a particular technique, the starting question was simply: “What should people be compelled/persuaded/allowed to do?”, with no huge distinction being made between compelling, persuading and allowing. If in practice they find themselves arguing that children should be compelled to do the right thing, that’s fine by them.

Now, however, the compulsion sector of the educational economy, the State education system, is letting the good ladies of the RRF down, as it lets most people down, and, almost despite themselves, the RRF are being drawn towards the voluntary sector, the sector where people get truly to choose what they’re going to do.

And a good thing too. So far I’ve been taking it for granted that the RRF people are entirely right about literacy teaching. They have certainly convinced me. But what if they are wrong? What if I have been conned by them? What if all their talk of “synthetic” phonics is the kind of obsessional irrelevance that “experts” so often indulge in to keep the masses dependent upon the continuing expert guidance of the RRF? Or what if the RRF people are right in lots of ways, but wrong in others, such as in many of the details of how to apply their basically right ideas? What if the RRF are right about everything, except that, when you meet them, they turn out to be annoying and unpersuasive people, whose main impact will be to discredit rather than spread their own good ideas?

Nationalised industries bring out the worst in all experts, however genuinely expert they may have been when they started out. The financing of anything by politicians is always erratic and chaos-inducing. And even basically sound ideas degenerate into a barbaric shambles through being forced upon people who don’t share them and who then go out of their way to make them fail. “Best practice” is identified, perhaps correctly, in one place. But it is then imperfectly described, and this imperfect description then becomes the basis of disastrous national diktats. All of which could happen if the RRF ladies – or people like them – were to dethrone and replace the “experts” whom they are now battling against. No, the

free society is the right place for them to win their victory, if victory it is to be.

### THE NEW AGE OF FUN

But, the sting in the tail of the free society, from the RRF point of view is that in it, it isn’t now just parents and teachers who get to choose which teaching methods to use or which books to buy for their children; the children themselves are now starting to take control of things. The “voluntary” sector, the free society, is itself now moving inexorably towards the “freedom for children” paradigm. The RRF people, whose natural inclination may very well be to boss the children around – for their own good, naturally – are now opening themselves up to being bossed by the children.

The reason for this is computers, and information technology generally. In the good-old bad-old days, when pyramidal mega-corporations, huge government departments, huge monolithic armies and patriarchal families all basically worked, they worked because the people at the top controlled the flow of scarce information.

But now we live in an age of television screens and computers in every room, and even if your particular workplace or family doesn’t quite operate like this yet, it soon will and we all know it. In such a world, the flow of information from the outside world to underlings of all kinds – employees, footsoldiers, children – can no longer be controlled by the bosses, the generals, or the teachers or the parents.

Which is all part of why people like the RRF ladies disapprove of computers. Computers are anarchy. Computers, just like televisions before them, are the dawning of the Age of Fun and the end of the Age of Hard Work.

The underlying work ethic of the RRF ladies and of millions like them is: No Pain No Gain. The ruling “work ethic”, if you can fall it that, followed by the global information industry is: Gain. Gain now. Gain pure and simple.

It’s not that the “no pain no gain” is fundamentally wrong. If it is interpreted merely as a kind of Sod’s Law of the Inevitable Complexity of Stuff, then fine. It’s often true. Even with computers. (In fact especially with computers!) But what “no pain no gain” can no longer be allowed to excuse is the deliberate imposition of pain, on the grounds that since Stuff is Sometimes Painful, you have to get used to that by suffering this particular pain, which I am deliberately imposing upon you, now. Teachers who demand that children “concentrate”, on whatever they, the teachers, want the children to concentrate on, may not now be teaching concentration. They may merely be interrupting the reality of it, and instead be teaching children to hate what their teachers call “concentration” and thus to identify concentration – the real thing – as their enemy. Disastrous.

In the days when what the teachers were teaching was the only thing there was to concentrate on, this distinction didn’t matter. You learned to concentrate, by concentrating on *this*. But in a world where there are a million things to pay attention to, no particular teaching rigmarole should be *demanding* attention. It must coax it, seduce it, persuade it. And when it fails to attract attention it must take it on the chin and wait its turn. It must behave like TV. (And don’t the no-pain-no-gain teachers just *hate* television, for that exact reasons.)

The great cultural triumph of the computing industry is that, unlike conventional schooling, it is now drawing attention away, by purely voluntary means, from television.

Conventional teaching *demand*s attention, and from some it gets it. Television seduces attention, and from the masses it has got it, but at a terrible price, that price being that the masses don’t learn anything. That’s an extremely debatable claim, but as a one sentence summary of the educational impact of television it is truer than most rivals. You don’t learn anything from television, because when you watch television you don’t do anything. So if you have any sense of your own interests you do eventually wrench yourself

away from the telly and get yourself a life. This trade-off is now embedded deep in our culture.

Computers are now slowly squaring the circle. When you use a computer, you learn, because you interact with it. You yourself do things, and thus you *learn* to do things. Computers, by the sheer logic of the free society, are, like TV, unable to compell attention. They too must seduce it. They to must charm their users into activity. They mus play games with their users. (And how! That's now a whole new industry.) They can't bully them, shout at them, throw bits of chalk at them. Technically they might be able to do this. Shouting is easy for a machine. Throwing chalk is harder, but surely doable in due course. But were a computer try such things the victims of it would simply switch to another one.

Seriously, if you are in the computer business, and you expect your customers to endure pain to get the gain you promise them, then as soon as they can they'll desert you for the first competitor who supplies the same gains without the pains. If Pain Then No Gain.

### **www.rrf.org.uk**

So, almost despite itself, the RRF is being sucked by the logic of the wider culture by which it is now surrounded into making its own distinct contribution to the computerisation of literacy teaching, a process which in the longer run is going to be epoch-making.

The RRF people have long known that one of their jobs is to act as boosters – an unpaid sales team if you like – for technology-based teaching techniques that they approve of. They make much in their writings of something called “Jolly Phonics”, which makes heavy use of video tapes to help both teachers and pupils. These and other literacy teaching systems will inevitably mutate into more heavily computerised systems as the years go by. Many of these systems have their own websites.

And now, as I say, so does the RRF (see above). There you can read their arguments about what does and doesn't work and which schools have switched from the latter to the former and how wonderfully they are now doing, despite the fact that many of the children thus rescued are from hideously deprived social backgrounds.

You also get links to other websites. Some of these websites are run by dodderly old right wing political boosters of phonics and of old fashioned teaching methods and old fashioned life generally, urging a return to the good old days and sodden in a thoroughly justified despair about the impossibility of ever contriving such time travel. These people are all pain and no gain, and I and the rest of the post-television world (which now means pretty much all of it) say to hell with them.

But other sites have the whiff of the future about them. These are the ones run by teaching systems enterprises that the RRF approves of. In general, although the RRF as at present constituted is in no state itself to be creating the right kind of computerised teaching systems, they are extremely well equipped to review the work of others, to recommend the good systems and to denounce the bad ones. Their detailed and very critical analysis of the videos supplied by the DfES as part of its Literacy Strategy, National Literacy Hour and so on, being a foretaste of the excellent analysis they stand ready to provide for any such technology based systems. Being teachers, they also have invaluable hands-on experience of which systems are already achieving something useful, without too much grief and rebellion from the kids, and which ones aren't.

### **“IT WORKS WITH THE MAJORITY OF MY STUDENTS”**

For example, poking about in the RRF website I chanced upon something called “Eddie Carron's Electronic Library”, which Ruth Newbury describes as “my favorite programme for boosting students' reading ages”.

Of this system Ruth Newbury writes:

To use the carron Libraries you need a multimedia PC with a soundcard and a pair of earphones.

The student brings up the programme, **and whatever their current level of reading success starts at the lowest of the six reading levels.**

There are 250 “books” listed covering the six levels and designated by colour of the title. They all have a varying number of chapters.

The student selects his own “book” from the designated level according to his interest. He then selects the chapter he requires. Once this is chosen the chapter will appear on screen – a chapter always fills one screen and the font size will vary according to the level – the lower the level – the larger the font – and the shorter the chapter.

Wearing the headphones (which help to cut out background noise and also focus the student on what they have to do) the student “reads” the chapter. This means that they move through the text word by word by pressing the space bar, and as they read each word will be highlighted. As soon as they come to a word **they are not sure of**, they press any key and the word will be heard through the headphones. It does not matter how many words they request in one chapter. Once they have completed the chapter the computer will take them through the chapter again, at the speed that they used to read the chapter initially and it will remind them of each word they requested by saying that word again in the correct place during the re-reading process.

Once the second reading is completed each word they requested will disappear from the screen and they will be asked to spell each word – with as many attempts as they need until it is there on screen – correctly spelt.

Once the spelling is completed the student requests a printout of that chapter. It comes with a report at the bottom of the sheet which gives information regarding reading speed and how many words were requested and which were correctly spelt.

The students prepare their work by themselves without teacher assistance. The programme puts successful reading performance within the reach of all students – no student fails with the opportunity to access unknown words and to have them reinforced before being required to read to a member of staff.

The student then takes the chapter to the person designated to tear him read. The aim is for the chapter to be read correctly with no errors. All errors need to be marked on the sheet and this provides the opportunity for further discussion regarding errors or the text itself.

When the student has read **three books without error** they move on to the next level.

And that's all there is to it! And it works with the majority of my students ...

I choose this example to end this piece with, not because it is a wildly exciting application of computer technology to education, but precisely because it is not. What the admirable Eddie Carron has done is use computers for what computers in their present primitive state are now best at, namely to supply an utterly predictable response concerning what is on the screen when you push one of the buttons at the front, every time, without error, with infinite patience and with no snide put-downs. It's a beautifully simple procedure. That word? How does it sound? Like this.

The computerisation of education is a momentous process bursting with long-term significance for our civilisation. Its core processes are destined to be as amazing and miraculous as Eddie Carron's Electronic Library is simple and mundane.

But that's another story. My message now is likewise mundane. Thank you and good luck to the Reading Reform Foundation, and keep up the good work, even if the story turns out very differently to what you now hope for.