

# The Can-Do Factor

*When properly taught, almost all children become enthusiastic readers and confident writers.*

**By Rosie Free**

If you were to enter a class full of nine-year-olds, you would expect some noise — some shuffling of books perhaps, or chattering and giggling, as the children's concentration is broken.

However, almost immediately after being introduced to today's visitors — including a photographer with a backpack full of camera equipment — the P5 pupils at Abercromby primary school in Clackmannanshire, Scotland, are sitting up straight with their eyes on the overhead projector ready to work out the spelling rule behind words such as knife, assignment, thumb, and whisper.

These children are the product of a pioneering reading and spelling program that hit the headlines after research revealed it was pushing pupils' reading age two years ahead of what would normally be expected. Researchers also found that the systematic phonics program was helping boys to read and spell as well as — and in some cases better than — girls.

The systematic phonics program is a 16-week course consisting of daily 20-minute lessons. Under the method, children interact with the teacher and use all their senses in songs, actions, seeing and touching magnetic letters, and writing.

The P5 pupils in Abercromby were among the first to take part. After a one-year pilot, it was rolled out to all P1 classes in the county. Following the success of the initial program, further year-long programs were created for children in P2 and P3.

The benefits continue into P5, when at an average age of 9.7, girls could read words with the skill of an 11.6-year-old and boys with the skill of a 12.2-year-old. Both sexes showed an ability to spell and understand at a level above their age.

Further research is being carried out to see if the advantage is maintained in P6 and P7, but Abercromby's teachers have no need of statistics to convince them.

Mandi Carmichael, the teacher of the class we are visiting, found herself teaching the systematic phonics program when she came to the school direct from her teacher training course six years ago.

In today's language class, she asks pupils to come to the front and underline the silent letters in the list of words. At the same time, the children have to explain to the rest of the class what they are doing.

Chloe goes first. "The silent letter in knife is 'k'," she says. "The next one I'm going to do is numb. The silent letter is 'b'. My third word is calf. The silent letter is 'f'." With a prompt from the teacher, she quickly changes her last answer to 'l'.

The pupils applaud and put up their hands in the hope of being selected next.

Later the children will make sentences containing the words and also practise spelling them, using miniature white boards to write the words, which they hold up to the teacher for checking.

When Carmichael started teaching at P5 level, it was immediately apparent when the time came to teach children who had been through the program. They had an enthusiasm for language activities, enjoyed reading, and they liked the challenge of tackling unknown words.

"If they are writing an imaginative or personal piece, they are able to write continuously without stopping to ask me or looking in a dictionary," says Carmichael. "Their imagination and thinking tend to flow more freely when they are not worrying about spelling."

Examples of the children's writing are displayed on the classroom wall under the heading: Beautiful Description. One child has written: "My belly was rumbling like a train catapulting (sic) along the track." Another wrote: "I was so shocked that a big black spotty cat got my tongue."

Headteacher Joyce Ferguson says the program has fostered a can-do attitude among children. "The children's use of language in imaginative writing is considerably better than it would have been years ago," she says. "Their confidence in putting pen to paper and transferring their reading skills into writing is much better."

She adds that because the children are meeting with success early in their school career, it boosts their self-esteem and makes them happy to tackle other subjects.

Ferguson admits there was some skepticism from teachers when the program was first introduced in the school. For a start, it meant a radical switch from group teaching to whole class teaching. Secondly, language was taught at what she describes as "a fairly fast pace."

"The skepticism that was there at the beginning was very quickly removed when people saw how confident the children were and how quickly they could use the letters to read and write words," she adds.

P1 teacher Moira McCulloch was one of the skeptics who felt the program was attempting to introduce too much, too fast.

"I was very skeptical. I thought it was far too fast and they would never learn all this. I wondered about what would happen to the children who could not keep up, but it's been proved even if children are struggling, if you keep to the class lessons, they do cope with a little bit of extra help."

"We did not realize just how fast you could push them on and they would keep up," she says. "In the past, our expectations of children have not been high enough. Now, in this school, expectations are very high."

*(Adapted with permission from "Education Instilling the Can-Do Factor," The Scotsman, March 12, 2003)*